STORYTELLING IN VIRTUAL REALITY: A NARRATOLOGICAL STUDY OF *MAQTAL*

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By

Mahmoud Jaber, B.A.

Georgetown University Washington, D.C.
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Mahmoud Jaber, B.A.

MALS Mentor: Cyrus Zargar, Ph.D

ABSTRACT

How can a story like *Maqtal* (account of martyrdom) of Imam Husayn be told be in Virtual Reality (VR)? The reason why this is a meaningful question is that the notion of telepresence, by which VR is theoretically defined, does not seem to bode well with narrative. Telepresence is defined as being present in the virtual world as if one were present in the actual. Because telepresence seems to eliminate aesthetic distance, the distance between the representation and its recipient, constructing narrative within that medium is a challenge. As such, telepresence is fully immersive. While a degree of immersion is needed in narrative, some aesthetic distance must be there to counteract that. In this thesis, I attempt to study immersion and aesthetic distance in *Maqtal* and to assess whether the techniques therein would agree with VR. *Maqtal* employs particular forms of immersion and aesthetic distance, mainly due to the fact that it is religious aniconic art connected to a ritual. Since a narrative is conceptualized as a mode of representation that involves emplotment on one end and a recipient on the other, the method of this thesis consists in framing questions of immersion and aesthetic distance around *Maqtal*'s emplotment and act of reception.

This thesis shows that when assessing whether techniques of immersion and aesthetic distancing in *Maqtal* would be compatible with VR, an underlying assumption behind the notion of telepresence is exposed. It will become apparent that telepresence is based on a strict separation between virtual and actual (which I designate as Holodeck telepresence), without which representing a story like *Maqtal* does not seem to be impossible. The thesis will close with questions and avenues that can be conceived as soon as the commitment to Holodeck telepresence is dropped. This thesis is particularly relevant to whomever is interested in storytelling in VR. It is also pertinent to someone studying VR in Shiʿi jurisprudence, as it opens up the possibility of thinking about *Maqtal* in VR.

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Introduction

The question "what can a story look like in VR (Virtual Reality)?" has been in one way or another asked by several authors in media studies. The question "what can a specific story look like in VR," it seems, gets asked less often, if not at all, by media theorists. The assumption is that different stories will present more or less the same obstacles when one attempts to represent them in VR. While there is a sense in which this is true in most cases, it disregards the fact that certain stories operate differently than others. In this thesis, I will attempt to ask the second question with regard to a particular story. That story is the *Maqtal* (account of martyrdom) of Imam Husayn, third Imam (divinely anointed guide) and grandson of the prophet, who was massacred in Karbala along with most of his companions on the tenth of Muharram, sixty-one years into the Islamic calendar. It is regarded as the founding story of Shiʿism and figures at the center of Shi'i cosmology, which not only informs how the story is told but dictates how events and characters can be represented. *Maqtal* is part of a religious set of beliefs and its connected practice, the rituals of Muharram, during which the ten days of Karbala, when Husayn and his companions were stranded in the desert, are commemorated. In light of this, the main underlying question of this research is: how does a particular story like *Maqtal*, which requires a particular type of aesthetic and religious reception, get told in VR?

In this study, VR designates a "particular type of experience" rather than a technology.[1] That experience is "telepresence," referring to the feeling of presence in the

1. Jonathan Steuer, "Defining Virtual Reality: Dimenstions Determining Telepresence," *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 1992), 74.

virtual world. As Jonathan Steuer writes, "presence refers to the natural perception of an environment, and telepresence refers to the mediated perception of an environment."[2] Telepresence is thus the experience of feeling present in the virtual, mediated, world as if one were present in the actual world. As a result of that, it is hard to transmit a story to someone enveloped in its events. That person would not be able to take in the events of the story as a person standing outside of the medium would. "When actually immersed in a high-resolution, 360° illusion space," Oliver Grau writes, "it is only with great difficulty that an observer can maintain any distance from the work or objectify it. It is well-nigh impossible to perceive it as an autonomous aesthetic object."[3] Of the things that pose a problem for narrative reception, this one is often discussed in the literature. Emotional and mental engagement with the work of art requires one to be at a distance from it, literally and figuratively. Inversely, since it brings about an "illusionary symbiosis of observer and work," pure immersion in the virtual world is said to produce "psychological detachment."[4] Some degree of immersion in the representation, however, is needed for aesthetic reception. But VR is so immersive that the distance between the story and its recipient is almost eliminated. Someone in VR is at risk of not identifying the aesthetic nature of a representation, because one finds missing "the observer's act of distancing that is a prerequisite for any critical reflection."[5] That distance is vital for narrative reception because "it comprises the

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2. Ibid., 76.

3. Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 202.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

possibility of attaining an overall view, of understanding organization, structure, and function, and achieving a critical appraisal."[6] Aesthetic reception or, as Werner Wolf calls it, aesthetic illusion requires both to exist.[7] On one hand, distance preserves "the observational awareness 'from without', namely that the illusion-inducing trigger is an artifact and a 'mere' representation."[8] Immersion provides "an intuitive mental and participatory simulation, where this awareness is bracketed off in favor of an imaginary experience of (elements of) represented worlds 'from within'."[9] Distance and immersion operate in opposite directions, because that they represent paradoxical tendencies in the recipient or viewer. Immersion allows one to be re-centered in the work of art, but distance must be there in order for the work to be received aesthetically. VR provides too much immersion and takes away from distance. On the other hand, *Maqtal* is a story that exhibits particular configurations of both: how it requires its recipient to be immersed in it and how it establishes aesthetic distancing between itself and the recipient.

Maqtal is the story of Imam Husayn, grandson of the prophet. It is an account of his martyrdom, along with seventy-two of his companions on the desert plains of Karbala. When he was in Medina, Husayn had received letters from the people of Kufa asking for his help against the corrupt rule of Yazid Ibn Muʿawiya. They promised him

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6. Ibid.

7. Werner Wolf, *Selected Essays on Intermediality by Werner Wolf (1992-2014): Theory and Typology, Literature-Music Relations, Transmedial Narratology, Miscellaneous Transmedial Phenomena*. (Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2017), 22. Google Books.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

allegiance, if he came to their help. He set out with his family, his companions and their families in the direction of Kufa. On the first day of the month of Muharram, Husayn arrives to Karbala, a military encampment in the desert off of Kufa. Yazid's army, commanded by Ibn Saʿd and outnumbering Husayn's, had been waiting. Ibn Saʿd's soldiers stood between Husayn and his people and the Euphrates, the only source of water around Karbala, as an attempt to strong-arm them into surrendering and pledging allegiance to Yazid. For ten days, Husayn and his people stayed in the desert without access to water. On the tenth day of Muharram, the day of Ashura, they were massacred.

Those are roughly the events of the story of *Maqtal*. Ways of telling them vary from one medium to another. Not all of these stories invite the favorable reaction of people. The movie *He Who Said No*, by director Ahmad Reza Darvish, was played once at the Fajr International Film Festival before getting banned. As this article reports, the movie "sparked outrage for allegedly distorted interpretation of history and for showing the faces of Abulfazl bin Abbas, Imam Hussein's brother, and Imam Hussain's sons Ali-Akbar, Ali-Asghar and Qasim, the son of Imam Hussain's brother, Hassan."[10] The avoidance of figural representations, aniconism, is important in Islamic art, especially when it is a figural representation of a holy figure. Aniconism, however, has a wider definition and it would be a mistake to reduce it to avoidance of figural representations. Not only are some forms of figural representations allowed in Shiʿism, there are representations of holy figures in painting and theater (if one considers acting a figural representation). However, the paintings in question have to follow specific rules in order

10. Par Faghihi Rohollah, "He Who Said No: Iran's most controversial movie?" *Middle East Eye*, September 15, 2015, https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/46637.

to be accepted by the people and the clerics. Aniconism is "when the image shows that what we do not see is more significant than what we do."[11] Aniconism is a different way of experiencing and thinking about art. It engenders thus a particular mode of aesthetic reception. In *Maqtal*, aesthetic reception can be influenced by several factors, not the least of which is aniconism. An entire social practice revolves around the story of *Maqtal,* a practice that heavily influences how *Maqtal* is approached and received. Each year, in the first ten days of Muharram, the martyrs of Karbala are commemorated. The rituals culminate on the tenth day, the day of Ashura. On that day, processions involving chest-beating, self-flagellation, and intense mourning take place commemorating the day the massacre of Karbala. As such, the ritual is tailored around the events of the story. The *Maqtal* narrative is never fully divorced from the ritual or the social practice because the role of the recipient of *Maqtal* is such that it plays a part in the configuration of the narrative, especially since the reception is anchored in a bodily and hermeneutic practice. The narrative configuration of *Maqtal* representations does not aim to faithfully imitate the events of Karbala but rather seeks to suggest a way in which the Shiʿi recipient can imagine them. For this reason, the narrative of *Maqtal* is always transmitted in an illustrative manner, which is the mode of a representation that "retells and completes a story, relying on the receiver's previous knowledge of the plot."[12] *Maqtal*, in its different practices and representations, has to be apprehended as a story.

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11. Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 5.

12. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative Across Media: The Language of Storytelling*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 14.

Not only is *Maqtal* the nexus of Shiʿism, it occupies a central place both in Shiʿi cosmology, in the story of everything, and Shiʿi ethics.

This brings me to ask the following question: How is *Maqtal* apprehended as a story? A little must be said on narrative in order for this question to be answerable. A narrative is an imitation of human action, allowed by a type of emplotment, which allows us to learn and judge the so-called semantics of action. Emplotment is the telos of a narrative, the "ordering principle," which breathes narrativity into the elements of narrative.[13] Telos is the "internal logic that connects one event to another within the story."[14] It is incidentally that which drives the story forward and which gives the recipient that impression of a "movement toward a predestined or predetermined end."[15] Telos, however, is not merely an ordering principle. It requires a certain disposition on the part of the recipient to receive it as a narrative. This point, made by Paul Ricoeur, is illustrated when we attempt to imagine what a Martian anthropologist would learn if they studied the game of chess. Ricoeur argues that it is possible that the Martian can 'deduce and formalize the rules of chess' and yet, they still would not be able to understand the 'notion of "game"'"[16] Similarly, the Martian can know all of the components of narrative and they still would not be able to grasp the notion of story. The purpose of a game lies outside of the game itself. It is also the disposition to play and be competitive which forms the telos of game and gives a game its *gameness*.

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13. William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to Temps Et Récit,* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 6.

14. Ibid., 40.

15. Ibid., 9.

16. Ibid., 40.

Likewise, a narrative invites its recipient, not only to apprehend its events but to do so narratively, which is what Ricoeur designates as the telos of narrative, or the notion "narrative." When considered this way, narrative is contractual, it requires a certain disposition on the part of the recipient to view the cues of the representation as narrative. As Ricoeur states, "it is the act of reading which completes the work, transforming it into a guide for reading, with its zones of indeterminacy, its latent wealth of interpretation, its power of being reinterpreted in new ways in new historical contexts."[17] Therefore, the act of receiving the representation has social, political, and hermeneutic dimensions that are outside of narrative. "The sense or the significance of narrative," Ricoeur writes, "stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader. The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. On it rests the narrative's capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader."[18] Any narrative, particularly one like *Maqtal,* requires a certain hermeneutic and experiential act from its recipient. On the other hand, the recipient must simultaneously be immersed in *Maqtal* and at a distance from it in order for the act of reception to be possible. As part of practice, *Maqtal* is a story that requires emotional and bodily immersion. As a cosmological story and a founding story of the Shiʿi worldview, it is linked to notions of intercession in the afterlife and divine Truth. Therefore, a *Maqtal* representation has to be constructed in an aniconic way, which means more than mere avoidance of figural representation. As part of an immersive practice (which involves emotional devotion, self-flagellation and rhythmic chest-

17. Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *On Paul Ricoeur Narrative and Interpretation* ed. David Wood. (London: Routledge, 1991), 27.

18. Ibid., 26.

beating), the story of *Maqtal* is constructed in such a way as to counteract the immersive-ness of the practice of which it is part. For that purpose, *Maqtal* representations employ certain techniques of aesthetic distancing. For instance in the theatrical representation of *Maqtal, Taʿziyah*, actors do not embody the roles they are playing. They hold their scripts in their hands, so as to not give the impression of embodying the roles of the characters of the story.

The first question to ask in attempting to find ways *Maqtal* can be represented in VR is whether VR can accommodate the dynamics of immersion and aesthetic distance required in Maqtal. In this thesis, I hope to provide a new way of thinking about aesthetic distancing in VR, by firstly studying the ways in which *Maqtal* representations employ immersion (in the act of reception) and aesthetic distancing (in the narrative configuration or emplotment). An assumption of this thesis is that even though VR might not intuitively display aesthetic distancing, conventions can be established so that aesthetic distancing take effect in a VR representation. The first chapter will revolve around the act of reception of *Maqtal*, which is an immersive act, by examining firstly the bodily practices of Ashura and then the hermeneutic dimensions of *Maqtal*. The second chapter will deal with how *Maqtal* representations in different media employ different techniques to establish aesthetic distance between the recipient of *Maqtal* and the representation. Finally, the third we will be an examination of VR in relation to those techniques. At the very least, I hope to have shed light on new ways of inquiring about aesthetic distancing in VR.

Chapter One

Ethics of Immersion in *Maqtal*

When thinking about immersion, the natural tendency is to consider it as a psychological state or experience that is brought about by an activity of some sort. In focusing too hard on the representation or the story, media theory has been inclined to reduce immersion to a psychological state of the recipient, one that is brought about by the representation and over which the recipient has little control or influence. This is why, in media studies, one finds analyses of immersive games, novels, movies, experiences or, otherwise, analyses of the psychological and phenomenological aspects of immersion. However, since immersion is seen as the effect brought about by a representation (and in which the recipient is passive), it is harder to find anything about the ethics (of receiving the representation) involved in immersion. By ethics, I do not mean moral questions about whether immersion is right or wrong. Ethics should rather be understood as that set of actions or dispositions that must be met in order for someone to achieve a particular type of immersion. In this case, the type of immersion is that of the Shiʿi experience of *Maqtal*. Therefore, the natural question is: what is the sought after immersion in *Maqtal*? And what are the ethics of the recipient of *Maqtal*?

It would be better to clarify why it is that I am asking this question here. VR is an immersive medium, due to which one struggles to find a way to tell a story in it. A potential point of clash (or perhaps resolution) between *Maqtal* and VR is the different experiences of immersion that each of them seeks. Immersion in *Maqtal* is the result of how the recipient of *Maqtal* is expected to receive the story. To clarify this point, one must consider the nature of a story. In order for a story to exist, in the full experiential

and cognitive sense, the recipient must be prepared to receive it as a story. This argument might seem circular until one remembers that what is at hand is an act of mediation between a representation and a recipient. Emplotment necessitates a certain disposition on the part of the recipient to receive the narrative configuration as a narrative. As Werner Wolf explains, "to recognize a 'narrative' as the result of a prototypical approach presupposes not only the cognitive frame 'narrative' in the recipient's mind but also the existence of certain features in the respective text or artefact which serve as the triggers of this frame."[1] While the general belief is that the recipient of the work of art is a passive observer, what is often missed is that there is a tacit pledge by the recipient to receive the work of art as work of art, the story as story, and the poem as poem. In the case of *Maqtal*, for example, that disposition is not only intellectual but physical, embedded in a set of practices. The narrative disposition takes one out of the pragmatic considerations of daily life. Instead, one approaches a representation with the attitude that it shouldn't be received in the same way as any other daily event is received. It dictates that the mediated representation requires one to succumb to a certain degree of "make belief."[2] In other words, as Wolf puts it

> This disposition implies the aforementioned medium-awareness as well as a willingness, on behalf of the recipient, to become involved in a reception that is not predominantly dictated by pragmatic purposes and includes pleasure as a major motivation: in representational artefacts this also means the pleasure of becoming re-centered, in one's imagination, in a here and now that is different from the hic et nunc occupied in the moment of reception.[3]

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1. Wolf, *Selected Essays on Intermediality by Werner Wolf (1992-2014)*, 484.

2. Ibid., 29.

3. Ibid., 21.

In the specific case of *Maqtal*, this disposition is determined by an intricate web of meanings, memories, practices, and symbols that make up the Shiʿi worldview. It is intricately connected to the question of immersion, in that *Maqtal* is part of a practice that engages the body and the hermeneutic capacity of the Shiʿi recipient. Since immersion, in the media studies sense, has not been studied in the Shiʿi practices of Ashura, I must try to study the wider notion of the act of reception of *Maqtal*. The latter connects to the religious nature of the practice. Since it is a religious story that is part of a religious practice, all representations of *Maqtal* take place in the general semantic context of Shiʿism. Since *Maqtal* figures at the center of Shiʿi cosmology, that heavily informs the state of immersion allowed in it. Therefore, this chapter will consider ways in which immersion in *Maqtal* can be viewed, in light of the act of reception exemplified in the practice. I will focus on two sides the reception of *Maqtal*: the body, in the self-flagellating rituals of Ashura; and the mind, in the hermeneutic notion of *Tashabbuh* (emulation). To put in VR terms, I will attempt to show that through the bodily and hermeneutic practice, the virtual world of *Maqtal* is taken outside of the normal limitations of a story and into the context of the actual. In other words, the practice revives the virtual world of *Maqtal* if only momentarily and immerses the Shiʿi recipient in its timeline. The purpose is ethical. By Reviving the moment of its occurrence, a Shiʿi incorporates the semantics of action, through *Tashabbuh*.

Tashabbuh and the Hermeneutic: Interpretation Through Imagination

The concept of *Tashabbuh* ("making a resemblance") emanated from a hadith in which the Prophet states "whoever makes himself resemble a group is in the category of

that group."[4] The hadith "carried a meaning of quest and aspiration, and expressed the necessity for making one's self resemble the good on the one hand, and for keeping one's distance from evil and the emulation of the enemies of religion on the other."[5] In other words, earliest iterations of *Tashabbuh* were concerned with the norms of social association: how to act, whom to associate with and whom to stay away from. The concept did not gain its meaning connected to *Maqtal* until the sixth century of the Islamic calendar, when "the meaning of *Tashabbuh* was stressed and used to justify the rituals of Muharram mourning,"[6] an interpretation made by a *Muʿtazila* scholar.

As Mayel Baktash writes, "*Tashabbuh* and in reality the practical philosophy of Taʿziyah, grew out of the accumulation of ritualistic experiences. It had a human quality and was an attainment of spiritual knowledge and development through devotion to the pious ones."[7] The "pious ones" refers to the Imams above all. The hermeneutic disposition of the recipient of *Taʿziyah* (the theatrical representation of *Maqtal*) parallels the mediating role that the imams occupy in the hierarchy of the universe. It also highlights the type of devotion that the ritual of Ashura through practice and rituals, can lead to "spiritual knowledge," as the previous quote puts it. Being the tablet and pen of divine revelation, Husayn is a mediator between God and men. This part is

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4. Mayel Baktash, "Taʿziyeh and its Philosophy," in *Taʿziyeh, Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski, (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 101.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 102.

true of all the imams[8]. Amir-Moezzi writes that "beginning with its earliest texts, Shi'ism defines itself effectively as a hermeneutical doctrine. The teaching of the imam/walī (friend or ally of God) exists for the essential purpose of revealing the hidden meaning or meanings of Revelation."[9] It is believed that the Prophet was referring to Imam Ali. The hermeneutic character of Shiʿism is in its very tenets. It exists in the belief that the scripture requires interpretation that only a select few can provide. In that regard, *Maqtal* is not only told by means of representations, but rather "Ashura discourses are also constructed through informal conversations—the daily talk among pious women and men."[10] Informal conversations are at the heart of the hermeneutic practice of *Maqtal*. That informal everyday is precisely what ties all of the rich context of *Maqtal* together. The act of reception is inseparable from its social and semantic background.

Emulation, or imitation, is thus the basis for Shiʿi morality, as it complements the mediated nature of Truth. Shiʿis learn their ethics by example and the practices of *Muharram* play a major part in that. *Taʿziyah* and *Maqtal* representations came out of that religious schema of imitation. As Baktash explains,

> Just as in social life the principle of *tashabbuh* had been changed from a concept to reality, and men in specific historical circumstances sought spiritual identification through participating with genuine feeling in the mourning ceremonies and gatherings in Muharram, *tashabbuh* and "impersonation" became the impetus for the appearance of theatrical roles. In reality, based on the

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8. Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shīʿism*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 58-59.

9. Mohammad Amir-Moezzi, Etan Kohlberg, Ḥasan Anṣārī, and Eric Ormsby, *The Silent Qur'an and the Speaking Qur'an: Scriptural Sources of Islam between History and Fervor,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 78.

10. Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 156.

> experience of observing the memory of the Ta'ziyeh events, the play (*shabih*) of Ta'ziyeh was the natural product of ritual, the harvest of *tashabbuh*.[11]

The roles in *Taʿziyah* are not acted but emulated, and it is, as such, an occasion to learn the ethics of *Maqtal*. The *shabih*, or actor, cannot occupy the role of the Imam or the martyrs in a realistic form. They rather place themselves on one footing with the audience facing them. The roles they are playing are never fully attainable, only speculated upon, learned and mediated. The realm of the Imams, it is believed, is one which a normal person cannot really conceive or access and from which they are always at a distance. *Tashabbuh*, therefore, naturally relies on interpretation and the hermeneutic aspect of *Maqtal,* an aspect that is brought to life by a representation, always incomplete, that requires the active imagination of the recipient. As such, the world of *Maqtal* is an active and organic world that constantly requires one's active involvement. As it will be explained in the next chapter, this reflects the nature of *Maqtal* aniconism, In much the same way a faithful representation of absolute Truth would be never-ending. Incidentally, *Tashabbuh*, as a model of internalizing morality, relies on there being at once: an intense sense of immersion in the story of *Maqtal* and some distance from the practice in order to allow for the actions and lessons of the martyrs to be internalized. As a result (as discussed in the next chapter), intense measures of aesthetic distancing are needed to counteract that immersion. The intense sense of immersion comes from the ritual, which through the use of sensory stimulation, actively engaging the body and the narrative element of *Maqtal* representations, allows the recipient of *Maqtal* to internalize the ethics of *Maqtal*.

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11. Baktash, "Taʿziyeh and its Philosophy," 104-105.

Ritual and the body: A narrative undertaking

Ashura practices and commemorations are tailored around *Maqtal*. The oldest expression of *Maqtal* is a literary oral one. On each of the ten days of *Muharram* a *majles taʿziyah* (a gathering to mourn), as the Arabic nomination goes (*Rowzeh-Khani* in farsi), is held to recite the events that took place on that day in *Maqtal*. In her book *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiʿism*, Ingvild Flaskerud notes that "the maqtal-literature, with collections of martyrdom narratives, became a resource for the development of various ritual expressions that allowed believers to express their devotion."[12] These ritual expressions can be in the form of private gatherings or public ones. Another form of ritualistic gatherings consists in the recitation and singing of lamentation poems, known as *marathi*, which are usually public.[13] The *qawwals* (the singers of these poems) are known all over the Shiʿi world. "In the Iranian Shia setting," Flaskerud explains, "ritual participants are presented with locally created and culturally embedded multifaceted sensory experiences in which visualization and seeing is part of complex ritual aesthetics."[14] Those aesthetics include a wide range of acoustic, visual, gustatory and olfactory experiences.[15] While Ingvil Flaskerud's analysis is concentrated on Iran, *Muharram* rituals are similar in different Shiʿi locations. This is also the case, for intsance, in Nabatiyye, a town in southern Lebanon.

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12. Ingvild Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism,* (London: Continuum, 2010), 6.

13. Ibid., 6-7.

14. Ibid., 2.

15. Ibid.

On the tenth day of Muharram, the main Shiʿi processions are held in the town center, culminating in the acting of the *Taʿziyah* play, which I attended this last September. The day begins with a feast. Shops are open to the people at the occasion and all kinds of free food is handed out during the day. In the butchers' part of the old market, every shop sets up a barbecue up front. Those festivities provide the sensory elements that work on activating the immersive and hermeneutic capacities of the recipient of *Maqtal*. For instance, the barbecue adds to the olfactory experience of the participants. The smoke mimics the ominous and mysterious environment in which *Maqtal* occurs, as if announcing the massacre (or representation thereof) that is yet to come. The general atmosphere of Ashura is chaotic, full of people and symbols, and accidental things to be taken as symbols. And while the general atmosphere might seem to be one of joy at that moment, these features of the ritual are not haphazard, for such "aesthetic sensory experiences are valued for their cognitive and emotive significances, which are held to have transformative effects on ritual observers."[16] The virtual world of *Maqtal*, is announced beforehand by sought after sensory stimulations that can remind one of the story. On the roads, people are handed water bottles, symbolizing the thirst Husayn felt in Karbala. One must notice, here, an oppositional element in representing the symbols referring to the story. There is an incongruence between the thirst and hunger in the massacre of the story and the offering of immense amounts of free food and water in Ashura. Scarcity is represented by abundance. That is a reflection of the hermeneutic nature of the practice. As such the act of reception in *Maqtal* is an act of interpretation and imagination. In sum, the practices of *Maqtal* immerse the recipient

16. Ibid.

in a chaos of sensory (and symbolic) stimulation. The active effort is not merely intellectual, it is also bodily, a price readily paid to access that liminal space between the virtual (the story of *Maqtal*) and the actual.

One such practice is that of *tatbir* (self-flagellation), which is in principle aimed at remembrance, at creating an unshakable memory of the cruelty and fate endured by the martyrs of Karbala and, accordingly, of their ethics and semantics of action. "The basic reason the ceremony's participants hit themselves and self-flagellate," Jalal Toufic explains, "is not some unreasonable feeling of guilt for not succoring imām Husayn and his family around 1300 years ago, but that such cruelty is a most efficient mnemonic."[17] The body then is itself a mnemonic device, the pains of which do not merely activate one's memory mentally but become instruments to revive the story. The memory consists *in* the practice to much the same extent a memory of the events comes to mind from it. The suffering of the body in Ashura reflects the pains of the Imams and upholds the view of the world in which suffering has a foundational character. As Ayoub writes, "for the people of God, this world is a world of suffering and sorrow, it is indeed the House of Sorrows."[18] The House of Sorrows is a fundamental notion in Shi'i cosmology. The Imams are at the center of the House of Sorrows. This notion finds its origins in the suffering of the Holy Family, to which all suffering is connected and which culminates in Husayn's tragedy in Karbala. The House of Sorrows, however, extends beyond the family of the prophet to include the world as such, where everything finds its value in suffering. Such a view of the world naturally places the tragedy of Karbala at its center.

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17. Jalal Toufic, *Āshūrā: This Blood Spilled in My Veins,* (Forthcoming Books, 2005), 14.

18. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām,* 25.

All of history before the events in Karbala is a lead up to that moment. All suffering thereafter is a continuation of it.[19] As a result, it is fair to say that suffering enters into the very teleological fabric of the Shiʿi worldview. It is not just an affliction; it is what links the Shiʿi to the world. In that regard, Ayoub states "the house of Sorrows is older than creation itself, and it shall remain until the last day when all sorrow and suffering shall be no more and the soul that was content during its sojourn in this vale of tears will enter into final bliss in the paradise of God. The House of Sorrows encompasses not only all human history, but the cosmos in its totality as well: the heavens and the earth and all that exists."[20] Suffering is the Shiʿi person's connection to the history of the world, to the absolute. History will stop on the day suffering stops. Viewed in that light, the bodily suffering in the ritual anchors one's body in relation to a virtual world in which suffering gives meaning to everything.

The suffering of the victims of Karbala is symbolized in two conditions, thirst and bodily pain, both of which are sought in the commemorations of *Muharram*. Husayni thirst is an operative concept in the daily lives of Shiʿis and has entered into the daily vernacular. For instance, in Lebanon's Shiʿi milieu, someone asking for water might say "*el-Husayn mat ʿatshan*" (Husayn died thirsty) or "*kirmel el-ʿatshanin*" (for the sake of those who were thirsty) alluding to the martyrs of Karbala. However, the memory of *Maqtal* is never fully complete, never fully crystallizing in the pronounced form of a realistic image or self-contained story. All representations of *Maqtal* fall short of

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19. Ibid.

20. Hamid Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," in *Eternal Performance: Taziyah and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski. (Greenford: Seagull, 2010), 26

delivering the last touch of determination that makes a memory objectified, the borders of which one can see. In line with this idea, Dabashi writes,

> Shiis are condemned/blessed forever to remember the central trauma of their history, but never so fully that they can forget it. The act of remembrance will have to remain always incomplete—like a dream that keeps haunting a people, forcing them to try to remember it, but never successfully. In commemorating the death of a martyr, Shiis are seeking to identify with absolute Otherness; with saintliness in the midst of sin and death at the moment of living; with dual, absolutely incongruent, Otherness; with the face and the body, miasmatic memory and creative incantation, of the saintly and the diseased. In that impossibility, mourning choreographed and staged, ta'ziyeh is made possible.[21]

In order never to forget the events at Karbala, Shiʿis try to incorporate an "absolute Otherness" that is mentally unreachable and irreducible, but which one has the duty to constantly attempt to imagine. It can only be told in representations where that impossibility is highlighted rather than buried under a veil of realism. The active effort required of the recipient of *Maqtal* is also exemplified by the fact that it is their duty to weep. If a person cannot weep at will or isn't in the emotional state to weep, they must pretend to weep. Physically exhibiting the state of mourning is a requirement. By pretending and exhibiting emotions in a "pulp" state the practice leads gradually to unlocking actual emotions of grief, where personal grief is given a channel to be expressed in the collective practice. In that sense, as Afary notices, these rituals "play a crucial psychological role. In a culture where saving face and hiding one's failures are important social customs, communal grieving and lamentation provide important

21. Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," 190.

psychological relief."[22] The grief of the collective practice of *Maqtal* allows personal grief a channel to express itself. These are precisely the type of associations for a feeling of presence in the work of art. The Shiʿi channels personal grief through the collective practice. It is through connection to the virtual state of universal suffering that one's own suffering finds expression.

"It is perhaps not a mere coincidence," writes Ayoub, "that Husayn is linked in this creation myth with the two items of destiny and revelation. The tablet is both the record of human destiny and the archetypal form of the Qur'än; the pen moves of its own accord in this heavenly tablet to trace out the divine decrees of destiny. In a very direct and special way, Husayn is connected with the history of creation and of mankind."[23]There are two things that one can take from this. Firstly, this highlights the political character of revelation in Shiʿi Islam. It anchors Husayn, and his political struggle, in the divine story of the world. As such, the tragedy of Karbala is the defining moment in the history of political struggle. In view of this, the body is also a political instrument and "is generally seen as the ultimate site for the demonstration of political might."[24] In *Maqtal*, the religious and the political are not separate entities. Politics is itself the realm of salvation. The body then bears the marks of a political message. To

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22. Janet Afary, "Shi'ite Narrartives of Karbala and ChristianRites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of the Iranian Revolution," in *Eternal Performance: Taziyah and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski, (Greenford: Seagull, 2010), 205.

23. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām,* 29.

24. Mary Elaine Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: Transforming Meaning, Identity and Gender through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning," in *Eternal Performance:* Taʿziyeh *and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski, (Greenford: Seagull, 2010), 348.

quote Hegland, “the ability to control another’s body, to mark it, act in violence against it, or force it to go through prescribed motions, is the most effective sign of power. Whereas the oppressor subjugates the other’s body and denies it autonomous subjectivity, the latter grasps at even small opportunities to retain subtle ‘objectionable’ viewpoints, minute behavioural deviations or a modicum of self-control over the body.”[25] The body is political and it is a unit of communication to that purpose.

In light of this, the bodily aspect of the ritual of *Maqtal* immerses the Shiʿi in the timeline of *Maqtal*. A ritual arranges social and individual life in a way that relates them to the “overarching time-structure of a culture.”[26] The rituals of Muharram immerse the ritual participant in the timeline of *Maqtal* by reviving the events of *Maqtal* (momentarily) through the performative and bodily aspect of the practices of Ashura. Narrative time merges with the literal time of the practice. Rituals link their protagonists to a worldview that is beyond the scope of their subjectivity, which is why it is a very powerful political tool. By the collective synergy between its different protagonists, the ritual ties the individual to the timeline of the collective, which allows them to adopt the narrative of that community as their own. In the case of Ashura, the practice ties the Shiʿi pious to a timeline connected to the rebellion of Husayn.This is the source of the Shiʿi’s political identity. As Dabashi writes, “Shiism is a religion of protest.”[27]

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25. Ibid., 349.

26. Vera Nünning, Jan Rupp, and Gregor Ahn, *Ritual and Narrative: Theoretical Explorations and Historical Case Studies,* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2013), 66-67.

27. Dabashi, “Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest,” 190-191.

Viewed in the context of *Maqtal*, the body is a memory inducing and political device. That falls in line with Islamic art generally, which "invites a kind of attention that is embodied, subjective, and performative. The body is important in aniconic Islamic art, not as something to be represented but as a medium of reception. This difference is central to distinctions between Islamic art and figurative religious art (such as Christian, Green, roman, and Hindu arts)."[28] One can go even further in the case of *Maqtal*. In *Maqtal* representations and in commemorations of Muharram, the body is not only a medium of reception, it is a part of the act of representation. Whether through crying in *Ta'ziyah*, or blood spilling during self-flagellation (usually done on white clothes), or rhythmic chest beating, the body becomes at once a medium of communication and a symbolic representation of *Maqtal*. As Edith Szanto writes,

> Even after the procession is over and the crowds dispersed, dozens of young male flagellants continue to walk around in their blood-stained clothes for the rest of the day. They bear visible traces of mourning. The traces are bodily: the pain fades, but the cut of the forehead remains for a while. The young men also make impressions on others. Tatbir influences observers: it can agitate them or make them think. [29]

On-lookers who do not participate in the practice cannot at moments differentiate between representation and recipient, as the latter becomes an active embodiment of the former. "They are sending messages," writes Hegland, "written on their very flesh, to Imam Husein about their loyalty and reverence, to other Shi'a about their credentials and adherence, and to enemies about their courage and conviction."[30] The traces of

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28. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 61.

29. Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 87.

30. Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism," 349.

blood that remain from the processions are part of the aesthetic visuals of the representation. Also, the remaining blood is also part of the message, which makes it an element that participates in the telling of *Maqtal*. That is also true of other physical manifestations that happen during those rituals. In the case of sung lamentation poetry for instance, no instruments are allowed. What instead provides the rhythm is the chest-beating of people in the crowd, who are guided by chest-beating leaders, choreographers of some sort. They are instructed when to beat their chest, or to stop, when to accelerate the rhythm or to slow it down. In *Taʿziyah*, the crowd is incited to cry as the story nears its culmination, when Husayn is murdered by al-Shimr. They not only cry as a reaction to the events of the play, their cry adds to the drama and accentuates it. In these examples, the body is not only part of the performative aspect of the ritual, it is part of the representation itself. One way to put it is that the crowd provides the effects that breath soul into the representation, the way sound effects breath soul into a movie. As such, the body's role in remembering and representing *Maqtal* immerses the Shiʿi in the representation. In a sense, the Shiʿi's body becomes an avatar (virtual body) that occupies a place in the bigger semiotic context of *Maqtal* representations. The body is re-centered in a framework in which its suffering is tied to the universal. The body then is the bridge between the virtual and the actual in *Maqtal*.

There are three different ways of conceptualizing immersion in narrative: spatial, temporal and emotional.[31] VR is usually studied in light of the first two. Because of the spatio-temporal experience of immersion in telepresence, VR is deemed to be at odds with narrative. Complete spatio-temporal immersion is achieved when the medium

31. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 85.

eliminates the aesthetic distance between recipient and art. “One of the most variable parameters of narrative art,” writes Marie-Laure Ryan, “is the imaginative distance between the position of narrator and addressee and the time and place of the narrated events. Spatio-temporal immersion takes place when this distance is reduced to near zero.”[32] One can notice that VR and telepresence are already deemed antithetical to imaginative distance (meaning they are completely immersive) by their very definition.

A fundamental assumption, however, of VR theory must be tackled here: is there a form of telepresence that does not negate the actual world entirely? In other words, is telepresence such, and only such, that it negates the actual world and fully immerses the recipient in the virtual world? Or is there a way of experiencing virtuality, of being in the virtual world, that does not negate actuality? Most VR theory I found treats telepresence as a concept that is completely separate from the actual, and as a result incapable of aesthetic distancing. In light of that, VR might seem to be conflicting with *Maqtal* as a narrative which, as explained earlier, attempts to invite the virtual to the space of the actual. However, if the idea of a telepresence is entertained, which does not negate the actual world, it might be easier to conceive of a story in VR. As such, two assumptions behind the notion of telepresence are highlighted here. The first is that telepresence is the experience of *one* person in the virtual world. In other words. it is deemed a subjective experience that is grounded in the body of one person. That is an assumption that is not always tenable. In comparison to that, the practice of *Maqtal* is a collective one, and that is part of how the story itself is constructed and how it is experienced. *Maqtal* cannot be taken out of the symbolically rich context and practice associated with

32. Ibid., 93.

it. It thrives on the chaos of signs associated with how sensorially rich the commemorations are and on the abundance of signs, media, and significations associated with it. The virtual should not be understood as a self-contained entity separate from the actual. In the context of *Maqtal*, symbols, meanings and untold stories are everywhere around the recipient. They are, as Ricoeur designates them, pre-figurative or pre-narrative.

To Ricoeur, the world is pre-narrative because "we understand the semantics of action even before these actions are retold."[33] As Jenny Rankin explains, "human lived or social reality is mediated by symbolic representations, which are waiting for interpretation."[34] The world is pre-narrative and *Maqtal* makes complete use of that and floods one's vision with symbols of Ashura. As such, virtual world becomes entirely entangled with the actual world. Thinking of a virtual "world" can be misleading here. Underlying the idea of a pre-narrative assimilation of the world is the notion that the "world" does not exist as such, except in the act of narration. One experiences the world, it is true, but one does not experience it as "world," only ever as fragments. As a result, the virtual world does not need to be conceived in its entirety in order to be brought to the space of the actual. Fragments of it providing a continuous experience need to be present though. In the same respect, by bringing virtual fragments to the space of the actual, the virtual "world" can be given presence in that space. *Maqtal* practices brings the virtual to life by creating symbols and communications in the course of the suffering of the body of the recipient. Furthermore, in order to revive the events of *Maqtal*, if only

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33. Jenny Rankin, "What is Narrative? Ricoeur, Bakhtin, and Process Approaches," *Concrescence: The Australian Journal of Process Thought* 3. (2002), 4.

34. Ibid.

aesthetically through the visuals of the *Muharram* rituals, the recipient's faith, imagination and active bodily engagement are necessary components. For the fleeting duration of the representation, the space and time of the ritual become the space and time of the narrative. The recipient, whether in their hermeneutic and imaginative capacity or in their bodily practice of self-flagellation, crying and chest-beating, is the bridge between the virtual and the actual. In light of this, if telepresence is divorced from its narrow scope, it is not hard to speculate about ways in which the story of *Maqtal* can be represented in VR.

In this chapter, I have studied the act of reception in *Maqtal* as a function of the body and as a hermeneutic doctrine. In seeking to apply the doctrine of *Tashabbuh,* emulating the Imams, the practices of Muharram bring the virtual into the context of the actual, through the chaos of symbols with which they immerse the recipient. *Tashabbuh* consists in the place that the Imams occupy in Shiʿi cosmology. *Maqtal* practices revive the virtual, in order to allow the recipient to internalize the actions of the characters. That is done through bodily pain and suffering. The House of Sorrows is the idea that all of history is a history of suffering. When the body suffers pain, it forges a link to the House of Sorrows. As such, the body, insofar as it endures suffering, is a bridge between the virtual and the actual. Furthermore, self-flagellation, which is done for the sake of remembering the martyrs, possesses symbolic significance. Its bloodiness is vision grabbing. Not all practices of Muharram include self-flagellation. In most of them however, the recipient of the art becomes a part of that representation. In light of this, does VR agree with the virtual schema of *Maqtal*? When it is assumed that telepresence is a state where the virtual is completely separate from the actual, *Maqtal*

and telepresence are probably irreconcilable. If, however, the notion of telepresence is changed so as to include the actual, then telepresence and *Maqtal* can be reconciled. Such a telepresence would allow the collective context to be expressed, in all of its rituals and symbols. And it would make possible techniques of aesthetic distancing that are fundamental for the telling of *Maqtal*. The next chapter will lay down the techniques of aesthetic distancing that *Maqtal* uses in other media. In the following, I will speculate on how those techniques can be used in VR.

Chapter Two

Emplotment and Aesthetic Distance

If one can say anything with certainty about the movie *He Who Said No* (mentioned in the introduction), it is that such a representation of *Maqtal* is the ultimate red line, the definite one to avoid. It seems that lay people and clerics objected to the figural representation of the Imam, in which an actor completely and realistically embodied his role. Put differently, this means that not enough aesthetic distancing, between the audience and the characters of the story, was applied in the movie. To reduce, however, the reason why realistic representation of *Maqtal* are disallowed to the mere showing of faces is to not fully understand aniconism in *Maqtal*. Representations of *Maqtal* are always incomplete representations of the events at Karbala. On its own, no representation can claim too much knowledge of the reality that occurred. Every representation relies on the network of symbols and semantics created by the sum of all representations and practices of *Maqtal*. In that sense, *Maqtal* is faithful to the context of aniconic Islamic art. Aniconism has two general motives. On one end, it keeps divine Truth at bay, away from any representation that might misrepresent it (including figural representation). On the other, it works to keep the recipient active in the reception of the representation. In the previous chapter, I studied aniconism as a function of immersion. In this chapter, I will study the aesthetic distancing of aniconism as it is applied in different media. Each medium has a framework for how to properly tell the story of *Maqtal,* rules and conventions to follow. The first part of this chapter will focus on aniconism in *Maqtal*, by examining it within the wider landscape of Islamic aniconism. In rest of the sections, I will study aesthetic distancing techniques applied in

Maqtal representations in different media, namely: the oral tradition, painting, *Taʿziyah*, in both theater and film. I hope to show that aniconism is such that the story of *Maqtal* is narratively configured with the very tools of aesthetic distancing. In *Maqtal*, aesthetic distancing is not a precondition for narrative, it is part and parcel of the construction of that narrative.

Aniconism in Maqtal

"Art is aniconic," Marks explains, "when the image shows that what we do not see is more significant than what we do."[1] Islamic art then recognizes and pushes against the fact that a medium can seem to be a neutral mediator of the *actual*. The more realistic representations a medium allows the more transparent it is as a medium. In *Maqtal,* the act of mediation itself is highlighted and exaggerated in an attempt to make it impossible to miss. The mediated content is second to the actuality, to the divine Truth, it is attempting to mediate. No attempt is made to mediate that Truth realistically. To do so would be impossible because Truth cannot be encapsulated. The experience of Karbala, the center of the Shiʿi worldview, cannot be encapsulated either. In light of this, *Maqtal* representations, especially in graphic representations, never make the overreaching claim that they are imitations of reality. In *Maqtal*, like in Islamic art, "the most important activity takes place at a level prior to the perceptible image."[2]

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1. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 5.

2. Ibid.

Marks continues, "the image that we perceive refers to its underlying cause."[3] Through the highlighted shortcomings of the medium, the recipient is invited to imagine the underlying cause of the image. Therefore, as Marks asserts, "in Islamic aesthetics, the active engagement of the beholder is the subject of the work."[4] In order for the recipient to be actively engaged, the act of mediation is highlighted, distorted and magnified so that the recipient cannot but actively imagine the scene. In line with that is the fact that *Maqtal* representations, as does Islamic art generally, never provide an account of the events that is developed and realistic enough to be deemed a "truth." The act of mediation is severely made bright by the techniques of aesthetic distancing, so much so that the account presented is never complete, never a "truth" that we can wrap our minds around. The truth is pointed to, but never expressed or represented.

One way in which *Maqtal* representations refrain from making overreaching claims is through their lack of suspense. There is no dynamic in *Maqtal* representations in which the representation gives the impression of keeping a secret (the ending of the story) from the recipient. For instance, in *Taʿziyah*, from the beginning of the play, it is explicitly accepted that "both the spectators and the actors know the tragic ending. They know that Imam Husayn and his companions will be killed and his family taken captive. It is, therefore, moot to keep this a secret to retain the story's suspense."[5] In that sense, *Maqtal* challenges Ricoeur's account of the *telos* of narrative, that unknown end to

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3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 63.

5. Nacim Pak, "Cinema as a Cultural Reservoir for the Shiʿi Performing Art of Ta'ziya," in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shiʿi Islam,* ed. Fahmida Suleiman, (London: Azimuth Editions, 2015), 217.

which the story is heading and which drives the plot forward. Husayn's martyrdom is a reality that is there, ubiquitously, which reflects the fact that Husayn was meant to be martyred in Karbala. In fact, according to Shiʿi hagiography, as early as Husayn's birth, the Prophet knew that he will be killed in Karbala. Facing that ultimate reality of Husayn's martyrdom, a *Maqtal* representation must exhibit modesty and establish a distance between itself and the actual event being represented.

However, writing about *Taʿziyah*, Dabashi states that "its historical roots and its momentary remembrance, are equally collapsed into each other, preventing a sympathetic distancing of the audience from the fact of the event."[6] The way *Maqtal* is represented in a medium is determined by how the medium is able to establish and protect a certain degree of imaginative distance, between the recipient and the fact of the event. This need to protect the imaginative distance in a *Maqtal* representation "gives the nature and disposition of its mimesis an entirely different modulation from that of the Aristotelian Greek *mimesis* or 'imitation', which is tantamount to onomatopoeia, or the actual making (*poiein*) of the naming (*onoma*) of the mimetic act."[7] In other words, *Maqtal* is not imitative. Rather, exemplified by the acting in *Taʿziyah*, it is "suggestive."[8] Keen to protect that imaginative distance, it employs techniques to separate the recipient from the fact of the event by highlighting the act of mediation. It will become clearer in the coming sections that the more invisible the medium, the more the need for distancing between the recipient and the event. As

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6. Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," 184.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

studied in the previous chapter, the recipient, in the body engaging representations of *Maqtal*, is such that they are both immersed physically and emotionally and should be distant enough from the representations to have the hermeneutic capacity of *Tashabbuh*. As the practice of *Maqtal* tends to be immersive, the representation of *Maqtal* works to prevent that immersion from fully happening. That is the guiding principle behind aniconism in *Maqtal*. In the coming sections, it should become clear that aesthetic distance is not one element of the drama, it is the drama itself. Maqtal is narratively constructed to cause aesthetic distance.

On Maqtal in Painting

In Iranian Shiʿism, the main source of *Maqtal* painting in the Shiʿi world, visual representation of Ashura through paintings is a very rich practice. It includes such varied things as "miniatures, wall paintings, tile-paintings, and paintings on canvas."[9] It occupies a fundamental place in the semantic context of *Maqtal*. In what follows, I am considering two things: the type of emplotment, of ordering of events, that happens in representations of *Maqtal* in painting; and the expression of aniconism that happens in those paintings. I aim to show that narrative emplotment techniques in *Maqtal* paintings are themselves aesthetic distancing techniques. In other words, emplotment in *Maqtal* paintings is itself aesthetic distancing.

Emplotment, or event ordering, in *Maqtal* painting is done in one of two ways: by the use of pregnant moments and by breaking the unity of the canvas. Since painting is a static and spatial medium, the first way to create narrativity in it is to break from the

9. Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*, 78.

unity of space on the canvas. In other words, the physical space on the canvas does not conform to a single represented space. When the unity of space is broken, the painting becomes episodic, showing different events of the same story on a plane that would usually not have had them. In *Maqtal* this method is in *pardeh-dari* paintings, which are "visual narratives" that "depict a combination of scenes from the battle."[10] The second method of ordering narrative events is by use of a "pregnant moment," a term borrowed from Lessing, which is a "mode of representing temporal events as action stopped at its climactic moment, or at a moment that implies but does not show what preceded and what follows it."[11]

The "pregnant" moment very often used in *Maqtal* is the death of al-Abbas, always symbolically portrayed. The recurring symbols are a puddle of water (alluding to the fact that al-Abbas was killed on his way to bring water the thirsty women and children), a crying horse and al-Abbas's helmet which one can typically recognize by the feather attached to it.[12] A pregnant moment also requires the agency of the viewer in remembering the events of the story. Through the use of the symbols that "tend to draw on culturally coded iconographic signs and a certain repertoire of motifs," figuring in the landscape of symbols of motifs of the semiotic context of all previous representations.[13] Paintings of this kind usually depict "the fate of individual main protagonists from the

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10. Ibid., 3.

11. Wendy Steiner, "Pictorial Narrativity" In *Narrative Across Media: The Language of Storytelling,* ed. Marie-Laure Ryan. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 150.

12. Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism,* 92.

13. Ibid., 78.

battle, such as Imam Husayn, his two sons Ali Akbar and Ali Asghar, his nephew Qasem and half-brother Abu al-Fazl al-Abbas."[14] The emplotment behind a "pregnant moment" relies on there being a semantic practice. Pregnant moments in *Maqtal* send the recipient's mind back to their repertoire of symbols and semantics. The recipient is required to deduce where the depicted moment lies in the story, and consequently, to imagine the rest of the story. That is the first expression of aniconism in *Maqtal* paintings, as it gives an imperfect picture of the story and thus induces imaginative distancing. It never allows the viewer of the painting to come out of the other end of the act of reception thinking that was an imitative depiction of *Maqtal*. From the onset, it is accepted that the medium of representation is broken in the face of the truth it is attempting to convey. No pretense is made as to the ability of a representation to encapsulate the truth of *Maqtal*.

Maqtal paintings indeed show figural representations of people from the holy family. One can notice several things, however, that make the showing of such faces acceptable. First of all, they are generic, which is a second expression of aniconism in *Maqtal*. One notices that most of the holy people look alike in paintings. In fact, had it not been for symbolic indicators and signs, the viewer would not be able to tell between the different Imams. They are not identifiable by a specific bodily trait but "by pose, costume, attributes, and place established through various markers, such as a palm tree, a tent, a mosque, an arch, etc."[15] Second of all, the generic representation of Holy people has the effect of producing a representamen, a sign, which "may create in a viewer

14. Ibid., 3.

15. Ibid., 78.

various mental images referring to different objects."[16] That is also true of other symbols. A horse without a rider usually is a sign of the death of its rider. However, the horses depicted look alike and, thus, a horse can sometimes suggest the death of different characters or refer to the sum of the martyrs of Karbala.[17] In painting, aniconism is both the source of narrativity and aesthetic distance. Emplotment does not happen as a result of aesthetic distancing, it happens within that very moment. That is the result of aniconism, which constructs narrativity as it simultaneously establishes distance. The common thread is the active disposition of the recipient of *Maqtal* to read the cues of distancing as emplotment by relying on their imagination and previous knowledge of the story.

Taʿziyah

Taʿziyah is the theatrical representation of *Maqtal*. It is mainly an Iranian tradition, but it takes place in other parts of the S hiʿi world. For instance, the town of Nabatiyye in the south of Lebanon has a rich tradition in *Taʿziyah*. The play depicts the events of the slaughter of Husayn and his companions on the tenth day of *Muharram*. *Taʿziyah* does not consist in acts and scenes as in Western theater, it is usually a continuous stream of events. In other words, *Taʿziyah* has an uninterrupted flow from beginning to end. Therefore, it can be said that it has the uninterruptedness of physical time.

16. Ibid., 92.

17. Ibid.

The fact that a *Taʿziyah* play is a continuous stream of events places the Shiʿi recipient at proximity from the events represented. Obviously, that proves to be problematic. As a reaction, aniconism in *Maqtal* is such that it requires some degree of imaginative distancing. Considering the fact that the space of *Taʿziyah* allows such proximity to the characters, these incongruities are very aggressive. In other words, since the act of telling in theater is almost made completely invisible, for not only is the audience in the same physical space of the play, the play has the feature of being an uninterrupted continuous experience, that act of telling must be made apparent and inescapable by the introduction of aggressive incongruities to prevent the audience from suspending disbelief. *Taʿziyah* theater shares a main similarity with VR. Since it is a conscious experience, telepresence rests on the notion of a continuous uninterrupted experience. *Taʿziyah*'s aniconic nature, however, works to counterbalance that natural closeness of theater to real experience. It does so through three features of *Taʿziyah*: suggestive acting, the ambiguity of time and space in *Taʿziyah*, and the use of conventional symbols to represent certain events. The question in this section is whether telepresence agrees with these symbols.

In *Taʿziyah,* acting is completely unrealistic and it makes no claim to be otherwise. The actors are called *shabih*, emulator, a word which has the same root as *Tashabbuh*. While it originated as an ethical concept, *Tashabbuh* seeped into the very fabric of *Taʿziyah*, to become the leading expression of its aniconism. Actors, in *Taʿziyah*, are only supposed to wear their role, not embody it. They hold their scripts

while reciting the lines of the characters.[18] The actors playing the protagonists' roles sing their lines while those playing antagonists shout them. In addition to that, "the director of T*a'ziyeh*," Dabashi explains, "is always present on the stage, not because the actors don't know what to do, but because the audience needs assurance that it is just acting."[19] In fact, before killing Husayn, the *shabih* in the role of al-Shimr invites the audience to cry over the fate of Husayn and he himself cries with them.[20] At the heart of acting in *Taʿziyah* is the ethical notion of *Tashabbuh* turned into an artistic principle. While *Tashabbuh* grew out the ethical principle of emulating the imams or mediators, it developed into a way of conceiving acting in *Taʿziyah*. Ingvid Flaskerud writes "*Tashabbuh*, 'to imitate', or 'appearing to be the same as someone else', became the impetus for the appearance of theatrical roles. The term *shabih* refers to an actor playing a role in which he will be designated impersonator of so and so. The idea is to ensure that the actor does not pretend to be the character but only a role player."[21] The *shabih* makes no claim whatsoever of representing the character. A very wide dissonance is established between what they are doing in the play and how one can image the characters of *Maqtal*. In that sense the ethical aspect of *Tashabbuh* is maintained, which falls in line with the fact that *Taʿziyah*, as an extension of *Maqtal*, occupies an ethical as well as a political role. To effectively assimilate the ethics of *Maqtal*, the *shabih* as well as the recipient should maintain their own agency and

18. Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," 184.

19. Ibid.

20. Nacim Pak, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 147.

21. Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism,* 87.

identity during the representation, by establishing and respecting a degree of imaginative distancing. The latter comes as a result of cognitive estrangement, which is a "means of making the familiar seem unfamiliar in order to facilitate a critical perspective on the familiar."[22] Estrangement is a fundamental part of *Taʿziyah,* and it is especially expressed in the acting style employed in it. That "critical perspective," about which Campbell writes, is precisely what is at the root of imaginative distancing. In other words, imaginative distancing relies on a certain degree of cognitive estrangement, on setting and highlighting incongruities in the very elements of the representation.

The ambiguity of time and space is another feature that provides imaginative distancing in *Taʿziyah*. Its time and space are not pronounced but ambiguous and shifting. With regard to the time of *Taʿziyah*, William Beeman differentiates between "three modes of temporal representation."[23] The first mode in question is "literal time," which is the time that conforms to the action taking place, for instance "the actual time it takes for a "dialogue to take place from beginning to end."[24] The second mode is "representational time," and it is time that does not match the duration of the action it represents.[25] Representational time is a main component of emplotment, as it is what allows the manipulation that groups multiple events into one. Unlike in other narratives, representational time in *Taʿziyah* does not present Husayn's death as a the

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22. Ian Campbell, *Arabic Science Fiction,* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.

23. William O. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Taʿziyeh," in *Taʿziyeh, Ritual and Drama in Iran,* ed. Peter J. Chelkowski. (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 27.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

final culmination of the drama. In other words, there is no *telos* kept from the recipient. Instead, the lack of suspense is embraced entirely. As argued earlier, that is part of the aniconic nature of *Maqtal*, as the representation cannot claim to keep such knowledge from the recipient. The final mode of temporal representation is "non-time."[26] This temporal aspect of *Taʿziyah* is often at play even in other representation of *Maqtal* in other media. There are instances and dialogues which could not have happened in physical nor representational time, involving people that could not have been in the same space. As Beeman explains, "non-time" is a kind of dimension which hallows the co-occurence of all sorts of characters and events which could not possibly have existed together at the same time. Even the known dead, such as the body of Qasem after his martyrdom, are able to take part in the stage dialogue."[27] These three aspects of time in *Taʿziyah* provide aesthetic distancing, not each individually, but by the fact that they "interpenetrate each other with no indication of shifts through theatrical devices such as lighting, scene change, etc., as must occur in Western theatre for audiences to understand what is going on."[28] That creates a dissonance between a play that is never interrupted, contains no acts or scenes, and different conceptions of time regularly changing the way time is represented in the play. That incongruity prevents complete immersion from taking hold of the recipient as it reminds them that what they are seeing is merely a mediated representation.

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26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

Dabashi writes, "in Taʿziyeh the stage never loses sight of its not-being-the-stage. Nonactors have easy access to the stage area; actors move in and out of character at will. There is fluidity between reality and acting because the actors are performing no act of fiction. They are acting reality."[29] *Taʿziyah* is performed in public spaces, in the same space in which the recipients lead their daily lives. The events of *Maqtal* against the backdrop of the actual is also a way to establish imaginative distance between the recipient and *Maqtal*. When the setting is familiar, it is hard to completely escape and immerse into the representation. Unfortunately, as stated in the previous chapter, telepresence in VR eliminates the actual world from the horizon of the VR user. What is there is the virtual world, and only the virtual world.

The space of *Taʿziyah* has a double directionality. On one hand, the scenic space in *Taʿziyah* is such that it fosters immersion. On the other hand, the *Taʿziyah* is performed in the regular context of daily life, against the backdrop of which immersion in the virtual cannot fully take hold. The latter also plays a big part in how the practices of *Maqtal,* as highlighted in the previous chapter, bring the virtual to the space of the actual. In the first place, scenic space is flexible and there are no strict lines of demarcation between the scenic stage, the stage or space of performance, and the space of the audience. The scenic space is loosely defined as the performing space. "Such an assumption about scenic space," as Reza Khaki highlights, "as performing space is expandable and can include all the public or private, urban or rural, open or closed and also temporary or permanent spaces for all kinds of dramatic, lyric and choreographic

29. Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," 184.

performances."[30] These spaces have similar definitions under this notion of scenic space. Reenacting *Maqtal* is not confined to one space, or to a technical scenic space that is separate from *other* spaces in ordinary life. This ubiquity is a direct result of the thought behind *Taʿziyah*. The reenactment of *Maqtal* should not be confined to one space. It isn't a play in the western sense. Its end is religious morality and as such it carries over to everyday life. But rather than that end being a morale of the story, to be taken as a logical conclusion, in this moral sphere the operating principle is *Tashabbuh*. The purpose is to invite the events of the religious story onto real life and to consider that story in a real life setting. There is no stepping out of social life into the virtual realm of the drama. The drama is here now, it only needs to be awakened.

Usually these spaces are more or less strictly separated in western theater. That is not the case in *Taʿziyah* or *Shabih Khanis*. Reza Khaki continues to write, "when the shabih khan performance is underway it is hard to establish a clear boundary and a specific distance between the scenic space and the audience, even though the Taʿziyah performance has a defined scenic space."[31] In other words, while the scenic space might be specially defined in the *Taʿziyah* or in any space where *Taʿziyah* is performed, it isn't semiotically so and psychologically. One of the goals of the *shabih* Khani is blur the lines between the world within the story and the world without, by bringing the world within to bear on the present moment. That reflects on the scenic as it does on the relationship

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30. Reza Khaki, "Identification and Analysis of the Scenic Space in Traditional Iranian Theater," in *Eternal Performance: Taʿziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski. (Greenford: Seagull, 2010), 94.

31. Ibid., 104.

between *shabihs*, or actors, and audience. The religious character of the story makes it so that the spectator is no mere spectator and that the scenic space is not separate from the space of the audience. In view of this, Mohammad Reza Khaki writes

> the onlooker of Taʿziyah is affected by the theatrical act and religious rapture and in some instances the performers and the audience practically become one, with one voice; they sing *noheh* and participate in the same act, beating their chest and head. In moments like this everything acquires a unique integrated expression, as if the audience has transformed into the performer and the totality of the theatrical space (audience-player and player-audience) creates the atmosphere of the Ta'ziyeh play.[32]

On the other hand,"Ta'ziyeh performances are easily realized everywhere, in towns or villages. They are performed either in a special place or in a square, depending upon the season, with any number of performers."[33] While the space within the play is designed to make one immersed in the play, the space outside of is that of daily life. Taʿziyah performances are not restricted to a specific space and time. They are performed in the casual context of the mundane. Even the actors' wardrobe is simple and does not "need to adhere to no particular historic period."[34] Of course the wardrobe of Taʿziyah can be chosen to reflect a certain historical period, but that is not required. This interpretation of space in Taʿziyah is both a reflection of and contributing factor to the ubiquity of *Maqtal* in the Shiʿi worldview, in the world as the House of Sorrows.

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32. Ibid., 105.

33. Sadegh Homayouni, "A View from the Inside: The Anatomy of the Persian Taʿziyeh Plays," in *Eternal Performance: Taʿziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals, e*d. Peter J. Chelkowski, (Greenford: Seagull, 2010), 124.

34. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Taʿziyeh,"

In order to avoid realistic representations, *Taʿziyah* also relies on certain symbolic and semantic conventions of distancing. Props and symbols follow conventions of meaning. For instance, the moment of Husayn's death does not appear to the audience. Instead, pigeons are released in the air, symbolizing "both the ascendance of the Imam's soul into the heavens and the messengers who carry the news of the Imam's death."[35] A conventional language of signs exists in which events of Karbala are referred to with the use of symbols. The occurrence of these symbols works similarly to that of the "pregnant moment" discussed above. But in *Taʿziyah* it has two effects, sometimes contradictory: it represents a vital moment in the story and can allude to different aspects of the narrative; and it shortens events that would have otherwise taken a long time to unravel.

Notice how emplotment and aesthetic distancing techniques in *Taʿziyah* parallel those of painting. Acting first of all parallels the generic nature of the characters in painting. In *Taʿziyah*, the acting is such that it does not reflect the role one is playing. Actors hold their scripts in their hands and the director walks in and out of the scenic stage at will. On the other hand, "the characters of Ta'ziyeh drama," explains Dabashi, "are not just metaphorical, they are metamorphic—they easily mutate into contemporary historical figures. The transfiguration of Ta'ziyeh characters is historically multi metamorphic, from historical to metaphorical, and from metaphorical to historical."[36] The audience is given that space to fuse actual and virtual. Aesthetic

35. Pak, "Cinema as a Cultural Reservoir for the Shiʿi Performing Art of Ta'ziya," 218.

36. Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," 186.

distancing is caused by several factors. In *Taʿziyah*, aesthetic distancing and immersion work in opposite directions of each other. Where the play is an uninterrupted temporal whole, representational time creates an incongruity, a cognitive estrangement, that distances the audience from the events of the play. Where scenic space is immersive, aesthetic distancing techniques are applied to make that space unreal, compressed at times, and expanded at others. And where the characters portrayed are adorned, acting is made so that the audience is constantly reminded that it is merely acting.

The film tradition of *Maqtal* draws on the theatrical tradition, which is why one speaks of *Taʿziyah* in film. In the older *Taʿziyah* of the nineteenth century, the performance "was divided into two parts: the *pīsh waqīʿa* or 'before the incident' and the *waqīʿa* or 'the incident' itself."[37] The former was a more joyous and festive prelude to the latter, as 'the *pīsh waqīʿa* usually consisted of lighter performances and varied from love stories to satire."[38] One should note two things here: firstly, joyous moments were accepted as part of the whole of *Taʿziyah*; secondly, a secondary performance can announce and point to the primary performance *Taʿziyah*. That means that the conventions of plot making and storytelling in *Taʿziyah* are so internalized that one could look at a film scenario and connect it, by virtue of its having the same structure, to the *Taʿziyah*. Similarly, *Maqtal* films are articulated around *Maqtal*, pointing toward it, but rarely representing it directly. That is the main technique of aesthetic distancing in film, though it finds expressions in different ways. It is in keeping with aniconism, in

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37. Pak, "Cinema as a Cultural Reservoir for the Shiʿi Performing Art of Taʿziyah," 216.

38. Ibid.

that it distances the events of *Maqtal* from the viewer and relies on the viewer's previous knowledge of the symbolic language of *Taʿziyah* in order to convey *Maqtal*. Consider for instance, Bahram Beyzaie's film *Travellers* of a wedding that turns into mourning, as the sister of the bride and her family die in an accident before reaching the wedding. From the onset, the viewer knows that the family will die, by the aggressiveness of the signs and gravity of dangers they face on their way there. The signs given, in the fact that they do not harmonize with the flow of the story, cannot but be interpreted as signs of their impending death. As Nacim Pak-Shiraz notes,

> The car's navigation through the dangerous, twisting mountainous roads seem to close in on them, the dark ominous tunnel they pass through, the musical cues that constantly change from merry beats to suspenseful tones and, finally the tanker that approaches the camera threatening a crash but that calmly steers back onto the road, all suggest the imminence of the incident.[39]

The signs are too hard to miss. Because the viewer feels that the family is always on the verge of dying, there is no missing the fact that they will die. Someone slightly rehearsed in the reception of *Taʿziyah* will immediately know to tell the meaning of these cues. The manner in which *Maqtal* is represented in film, then, is always a story that hinges either on the techniques of *Taʿziyah* and parallels the method of telling the story of Husayn (while preserving some of the themes too) or on the story of *Karbala* itself. The latter figures in another of Beyzaie's movies *The Day of The Incident*, which is the story of ʿAbadallah, a christian man who converts to Islam for the love of Rahila, a Muslim girl. He had been turned down by her father thirty-seven times. This time the father accepts. During the celebration, he could not help hearing a voice asking for help but it was not that of an attendee. Just before the marriage rites are performed, he is compelled to

39. Ibid., 218.

interrupt and set out in search of that voice. The story is that the dangers and challenges that he faces on his way, following that voice. On the tenth day, he reaches Karbala right after the massacre is committed.[40] The film combines "the Western-secular medium of filmmaking and the Iranian tradition of the retelling of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions."[41] Aesthetic distancing in film mainly has to do with the story that is being told. In *The Day of the Incident*, the story of Karbala is a deciding factor in the movie. It drives the character to the conclusion of the plot. Unlike in *Taʿziyah*, the main character is driven, through the telos of narrative, to the culmination of the plot, which the viewer does not yet know. The culmination itself, however, is symbolic representation of the massacre at Karbala. Another example of this is the TV series *Mokhatarnameh*, which tells the story of the rebellion of Mukhtar al-Thaqafi that took place in Iraq after the death of Husayn. The plot starts with Mukhtar, after having left politics for a long time, decides to come back to Kufa to prepare for Husayn's arrival after he finds out that Imam Hassan, Husayn's older brother, suffered a fatal injury. In Kufa, he gets imprisoned for attempting to suppress riots, and only released after the massacre of Karbala. After that, the story continues with Mukhtar's rebellion. The plot of *Mukhtarnameh* distances the viewer from the events of *Maqtal*, by telling the story of Mukhtar, which borders the story of Karbala.

Aesthetic distancing in *Maqtal,* is prompted by its aniconism, which requires, at once, an active recipient, bodily and mentally immersed in the representation, and the distance of the event alluded to in the representation. The reason is not simply because

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40. Pak, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film*, 150.

41. Pak, "Cinema as a Cultural Reservoir for the Shiʿi Performing Art of Taʿziyah," 216.

it is not allowed to the faces of holy figures. That has to do with the fact that the truth of *Maqtal* cannot be represented. It is forever meant to be imagined. Techniques of aesthetic distance are different in each medium. A common feature of representations of *Maqtal* in different media, however, is that narrativity in a representation of *Maqtal* is molded and shaped in a way that induces aesthetic distancing. In painting, pregnant moments and the disunity of space are the main causes of narrativity. One can think of those as aesthetic distancing tools because of the fact that they recognize a time and a space beyond the actual time and physical space of the canvas. The pregnant moment alludes to story outside of it, thereby distancing one from the painting itself. The generic nature of the characters (and the representation) allows for the emergence of representamens, signs that can allude to different things at the same time. That is a fundamental part of narrativity *Maqtal* paintings. Representamens are also distance inducing instruments. Techniques similar to those are used in *Taʿziyah*. The acting in *Taʿziyah* distances the actors from their roles, which makes the acting generic. And while *Taʿziyah* is an uninterrupted set piece, there are different notions of time in it that are always at play, shifts from one mode of time are done without warning. The space in *Taʿziyah* is such that it always alludes to a real setting never fully immersing in the place and time of *Maqtal*. Finally, in film, the story is constructed to always allude to *Maqtal* but never to represent it directly. It is either the realistic representation of a story that borders on that of Karbala, or a *Taʿziyah*-like representation of a modern story. Such a technique in film, in fact, parallels the notion of a pregnant moment in *Maqtal* paintings. In sum, aesthetic distancing techniques can be divided into three: acting or

generic representation, distortion of space and time, and distancing by content. All of these are at the same time ways of narratively configuring *Maqtal*.

Chapter Three

Immersion and Aesthetic Distancing in Virtual Reality

Telepresence seems to negate the actual world by replacing the here and now of actuality (outside of the medium) with the here and now of virtuality (inside the medium). *Maqtal*, on the other hand, fuses the virtual and the actual. The active role required of the recipient of *Maqtal* in some ways conforms to VR immersion and in others does not. As a unit of communication, a mnemonic device and a part of the representation, the body has to keep connection to the actual world. One goal of this study, however, is to entertain whether a way can be found to reconcile between telepresence and the act of reception of *Maqtal*. While full immersion is not in itself forbidden in representations of *Maqtal*, there must be a way in VR in which the actual world is not negated, but rather highlighted. In other words, a way has to be found for aniconism within the space of telepresence. In VR, "the backgrounding of the act of telling annihilates the imaginative distance between discursive space and storyworld, fusing the consciousness of reader and narrator into the same act of perception."[1] The act of mediation in VR, because of telepresence, is made invisible. In a tele-present experience in VR, what is mediated to the VR user is a conscious experience, that of whom would normally be the narrator in other media. One is in the medium, in the representation, so much so that that distance between the actual and the narrated, which normally had to be bridged through one's imagination, is almost eliminated. Whatever faculty that is activated by a medium belongs to both the narrator and the recipient for the duration of the narrative representation in VR. "The virtual body,"

1. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 95.

Mary-Laure Ryan states, "whose perspective determines what is perceived belongs at the same time to the narrator and the reader—or to be more precise, to the reader's counterpart in the fictional world—just as, in classical paintings, the eye that contemplates the scene belongs to both painter and spectator."[2] In itself, that is definitely a problematic feature of telepresence in regards to *Maqtal*. But that notion of telepresence is built around several assumptions that make out telepresence to be a rigid notion that admits no variations. An examination of telepresence under the light of *Maqtal*'s dynamics of immersion and aesthetic distance will come to show that the story of *Maqtal* is indeed possible to portray in VR, if certain assumptions about the nature of telepresence are forgone. My examination of aesthetic distancing will attempt to draw on a comparison between VR and other media that represent *Maqtal*. In the first part, I will make the argument that VR might be compatible with *Maqtal* because of the way *Maqtal* is narratively constructed. In the second part, I will provide an analysis of *Maqtal*'s immersive act of reception and VR. Finally, I will offer a speculative comparison about the differences between VR and other media and the ways in which aesthetic distancing can be conceived in VR.

Presence and the Emplotment of Maqtal

Presence in the medium, or telepresence, is the result of a perception that is anchored in the body.[3] The first person experience of someone present in the virtual world starts with their body. One's body (position, physical location, dimensions,

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 54.

capabilities) determines what is in their field of vision. Thus, "dependent on the direction of the observer's gaze," Oliver Grau writes, "the viewpoint is no longer static or dynamically linear, as in film, but theoretically includes an infinite number of possible perspectives."[4] That infinite number of perspectives comes from the VR user's ability to move at will in the simulation. But the role of the body is beyond just one of framing perception. As Mary Laure Ryan writes, "presence involves the mobility of the user's body with respect to the "present" object." In other words, the bodily relation of the user to the "present" object determines two things: what one can perceive and how one believes they can act on that object. As such, the experience of telepresence can be conceptualized through the interplay of two very intricately connected processes: immersion or the "control of relation of sensors to environment," and interactivity or the "ability to modify the physical environment."[5] Both of which play a role in creating the feeling of telepresence and both, incidentally, can obstruct a narrative. It is important to note that the distinction between immersion and interactivity is merely a conceptual distinction, for in reality they are not really separable. In addition, both immersion and interactivity enhance the VR user's agency within the virtual world. While being interviewed by John Bucher, Jessica Brillhart, Principal Filmmaker for VR at Google, responded to a question about the challenges of experiential editing, an editing technique tailored around the VR user's agency in the virtual world. Brillhart explained that, "a lot of it has to do with understanding how a visitor engages with the world that she's in. It's the first step in getting an understanding of how it was more of a

4. Grau, *Virtual Art*, 16.

5. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 51.

dialogue and a dance with someone that was in the space instead of it being something that I wanted or I was going to force a person to experience."[6]

To put it differently, VR producers have to work with the fact that a VR user possesses agency in the virtual world, an agency made possible by the degree of immersion and interactivity the medium admits. The VR user is free to gaze whichever way they want and follow whichever object they want. If there ever is a plot to follow, immersion makes it challenging to keep the user's gaze focused on the events of the plot. On the other hand, interactivity affects the plot and might change the story altogether. Both immersion and interactivity make it harder to force a linear storyline upon the user without undermining their agency and, as a result, their feeling of telepresence. While this nature of immersion appears to absolutely conflict with other stories, *Maqtal* is built around the assumption of immersion. The recipient of *Maqtal* is not expecting a well-cut plot, but rather a storm of symbols to go along with immersion they get from the bodily practice associated to *Maqtal.* Reception, in both VR and *Maqtal*, is anchored in the personal and bodily experience of the recipient. In narratology, it is assumed that the act of reception of a story is always the same. In the context of western art, most stories are received similarly. The act of reception of someone watching a movie is determined by the facing of the screen, the silence while watching and the immersion in a plot, the ending of which the viewer does not yet know. In *Maqtal*, the act of reception is not the same because of the fact that the story is a religious one. The recipient is expected to be active both in the bodily reception of *Maqtal* (for instance, people watching *Taʿziyah* for example are expected to cry and beat their chest at the moment

6. John Bucher, *Storytelling for Virtual Reality: Methods and Principles for Crafting Immersive Narratives*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 31.

Husayn dies) and in the application of a hermeneutic faculty. An effect of the latter would be that the *Maqtal* recipient's gaze is not looking for a story but for symbols. The act of reception of *Maqtal* reflects how it is narratively configured, in other words, how emplotment is constructed.

Let us briefly consider emplotment. According to Ricoeur, a narrative is an imitation of action, a mimesis, which is made possible by the fact that its structure allows to put together heterogeneous elements into one. As such, a story is a "discordant concordance," in that it is a synthesis on several levels.[7] The plot combines a series of occurrences into what seems like a coherent succession. Ricoeur describes it first of all as a "synthesis between the events or incidents which are multiple and the story which is unified and complete"[8] A narrative is the result of a judgment passed on a set of events, which allows the storyteller to include some of these events and to exclude others. As such, a narrative links together events ahead of others into a successive whole with a beginning, a middle and an end. In addition, a narrative makes determinations about those events that are often ad hoc. One such decision, for instance, is the choice the event to begin the narrative with. Secondly, according to Ricoeur, the plot

> Organizes together components that are as heterogeneous as unintended circumstances, discoveries, those who perform actions and those who suffer them, change or planned encounters, interactions between actors ranging from conflict to collaboration, means that are well or poorly adjusted to ends, and finally unintended results; gathering all these factors into a single story makes the plot a totality which can be said to be at once concordant and discordant.[9]

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7. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative*, 6.

8. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 21.

9. Ibid.

In other words, different events are not all naturally explainable within the same order of reality. Those same events are put on the same order of reality when they are grouped together in a story and presented as causally linked. Finally, a plot is a synthesis between "two sorts of time."[10] While a story is a "temporal totality," it reconciles between "time as passage" and "time as duration."[11] The former designates the temporal experience of narrative as a "discrete succession that is open and theoretically indefinite, a series of incidents (for we can always pose the question: and then? And then?)."[12] In this first sense, one experiences the story with a forward outlook, through the lens of characters who "move forward in a world where choices must be made with only an approximate guess about their consequences, where accidents might occur at any moment to alter the fortunes of the individual or the community, and where people must be judged on the shifting and uncertain ground of social appearances."[13] Put differently, this first sense of time reflects the uncertainty of what could happen to the characters. The second sense of time, time as duration, is "characterized by the integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration."[14] From this perspective, the story is experienced "as a completed whole," from which the recipient can judge the actions of the characters and their outcomes.[15]

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10. Ibid., 22.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative*, 48.

14. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22.

15. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative*, 48.

These three kinds of syntheses are why narrative is a discordant concordance, bringing discordant elements into the concord of one story.

What narratology, inspired by western storytelling, focuses on is the "concordance" in "discordant concordance," in that it is more interested with a narrative's method of ordering events. In *Maqtal*, what is harbored and nurtured is the "discordant" part, which means that *Maqtal* leans toward disrupting the ordering process of narrative. Time as passage is not entirely provided by the story itself, some of it comes from the practice done alongside the story, i.e. in the act of reception. *Maqtal* makes no pretense to be headed toward an unknown ending. The ending is known and declared from the beginning. *Maqtal* is not a discordant concordance, it is a concordant discordance. It puts its recipient at the center of an entire network of symbols, meanings, expressions, and social and performative roles. While the plot is important, the world of *Maqtal* in all of its signs is more important. That is why telos can be compromised for a little more discordance. *Maqtal* responds to the three syntheses of emplotment by distortions, provided by very techniques of aesthetic distancing: acting or generic representation, distortion of space and time, and distancing by content. What result are narrative syntheses specific to *Maqtal*. This is why, while the immersive nature of VR does not bode well with other stories, immersion in *Maqtal* is a physical and mental act, a deliberative action. That deliberation is allowed by aesthetic distancing. It is still an open question whether the parameters of immersion in *Maqtal* agree with those of immersion in VR. On the other hand, that the act of reception in *Maqtal* is immersive by default is countered by techniques of aesthetic distancing, which is integral to *Maqtal* representations, so much so that an integral part of how the

story is constructed narratively is an instrument for aesthetic distancing. That dual nature of *Maqtal* is the dynamic at the heart of its aniconism.

On mimesis in *Taʿziyah*, Hamid Dabashi writes,

> If one sees a ta'ziyeh with a built-in Aristotelian conception of mimesis, one is terribly disappointed. One has to understand how, in the doctrinally charged collapse of the then and the now, the moral and the political, and the real and the ideal, the charismatic paradox at the heart of Shiism informs the dramatic tension at the heart of ta'ziyeh and all of its suggestive symbolics of acting, staging, showing and representing. [16]

Perhaps this type of emplotment, which already incorporates techniques of aesthetic distancing in it, can be more accommodating to the experience of telepresence. Since the techniques of distancing are precisely those elements around which the story of *Maqtal* is built, perhaps a certain notion of telepresence can be conceived according to which representing *Maqtal* would be possible in VR.

Immersion in Maqtal *and Telepresence*

Telepresence seems to be at odds with the type of immersion in *Maqtal*. Immersion in *Maqtal* is experiential, it both requires a bodily and a hermeneutic disposition. Telepresence in VR is being in the medium as if one were in the actual world. Even with that categorization, however, telepresence could take a lot of shapes. An extreme type of telepresence would be the Holodeck, from *Star Trek,* which needs to be considered to give the reader a concrete idea of what telepresence could mean. The Holodeck has been used by several VR theorists to describe the experience of telepresence. The Holodeck is a simulation engine which one walks into where one can

16. Dabashi, "Taʿziyeh as Theater of Protest," 185.

can simulate any time, experience and place (real or fictive) that they wish. One of its features is "active embodiment" and it is exemplified by the fact that the VR user enters the virtual world and can interact with things in it.[17] Connected to this is the spatial nature of the medium, or what Ryan calls the "spatiality of the display."[18] In the telepresence of the Holodeck, one is present in the virtual world and cannot go back to the actual world except if one turns off the simulation. That is telepresence with an off switch, in that when one is in the virtual world, the actual world does not really exist or at least it is irrelevant. As described in the introduction to this thesis, telepresence is a function of two things: immersion and interactivity. Taken apart, each of immersion and interactivity can be problematic to *Maqtal* representations, challenging their aniconic nature. Immersion is problematic because when one is present in the medium, the actual world does not exist. That is antithetical to *Maqtal* in that it negates the outside world and it eliminates completely one's ability to see the medium during the act of mediation. Two problems to solve then: the outside or actual world must be experienced and the medium itself should make itself apparent. If we take a look at current AR technologies, they can lead to a form of telepresence that does not totally negate the actual world. Not only so, one can conceive of ways in which the generic representation of *Maqtal* can make it so that even while one is present in an augmented reality that act of mediation is not rendered unnoticeable. Even moments of complete immersion in the realm of *Maqtal*, as long as they are constantly interrupted with moments of aesthetic

17. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality,* 38.

18. Ibid.

distance, can be acceptable. Aniconism would require, however, that no proximity to the Holy figures is allowed without some sort of distortion.

The problem of interactivity is connected to two issues. Firstly, Maqtal, a story that tends to engender bodily practices, is represented in VR, a medium within which one's experience is embedded in the body. They seems to be at odds with each other. However, telepresence inspired by AR can lead to ways in which those rituals can incorporate graphic representations of *Maqtal.* For instance during a procession, a Shiʿi can see certain symbols or representamens connected to the battle. The second issue has to do with the fact that the story of Husayn cannot be altered. In light of this one can ask two questions: how can the practice of Maqtal as social ritual be incorporated to the representation of *Maqtal* in VR? And what could the *Maqtal* recipient in VR be allowed to do in the realm of a story that is at the center of Shiʿi cosmology?

One place to begin to think about this is: boundaries have to be drawn in order any form of interactivity to be possible in VR. As such, conventions for allowed action in *Maqtal* representation in VR must be thought. One way to conceptualize narrative action (action within the confines of a story) in VR is by viewing it as improvised action that leads to the emplotment of the narrative. In his article, "Scripting Beloved Discomfort: Narratives, Fantasies, and Authenticity in Online Sadomasochism," Tuomas Harviainen analyzes the structure of sadomasochistic sessions.[19] As narrative practices, sadomasochistic sessions are semi-scripted, by means of a contractual agreement

19. Tuomas Harviainen, "Scripting Beloved Discomfort: Narratives, Fantasies, and Authenticity in Online Sadomasochism," in *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds,* ed. Hatavara, Mari, Matti Hyvärinen, Maria Mäkelä, Frans Mäyrä, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

beforehand that set the boundaries within which the bodily practice takes place. This contractual agreement does not obstruct improvisation, i.e. the recipient's room for deliberation. It is what makes it possible. As Harviainen explains, "to improvise a performative action is to be goal-directed yet make decisions that alter the activity as it is being performed." The goal in sadomasochistic sessions is a certain type of bodily pleasure. In *Maqtal*, the goal would be a certain type of religious experience, embodied but distant enough for imagination to function. Semi-scripts, achieved by way of conventions, can guide the Shiʿi through their experience of VR without compromising the telepresence of the experience on one hand, and without compromising the act of the reception of *Maqtal* on the other. The act of reception in Ashura practices is structured around an action, which parallels the events and suffering at Karbala: the self-flagellation or beating of the chest, and the crying. These constitute an active imitation of the events that happen to the characters. Studying them can prove helpful to find that semi-script that would anchor a representation of *Maqtal* in VR in the body. The idea is that a way of ensuring the act of reception required by Ashura is to draw guidelines for improvisation in VR. Guidelines (semi-scripts, cues, symbols, bodily techniques) should make the reception of *Maqtal* in VR governed by certain rules within the confines of which the recipient would be able to maneuver between a practice that requires imaginative distance and a medium that produces telepresence. The next part will not only examine potential distancing techniques agreeable with VR. It will attempt to show that if some of the assumptions behind the notion of telepresence are relaxed, meaningful question related to *Maqtal* representation in VR becomes possible. The aim

of the following section is to present those questions, meaningfully relevant to the concerns of storytelling in VR.

VR and other media

In this section, the aim is to ask certain questions that are meaningful if one forgoes of the fundamental assumption of VR, the Holodeck form of telepresence. Linguistic storytelling is the narrative medium par excellence because it is a purely temporal medium and it is the medium by which the narrativity of other media is measured.[20] It is temporal because its events are presented in succession, paralleling the way sentences and verses are constructed, and thus received. The reader, for instance, reads every line after another which sets the tone for a temporal narrative structure that is heading toward an end, a *telos*. The act of telling in oral or written stories is the most apparent. One has no doubt that one is being told a story through the perspective of a mediator and the use of a medium. VR is more of a spatial medium than a temporal one. The experience of a person within it extends in space, less so in time. A first person experience is hard to manipulate temporally, precisely because to the telepresence that it seems to allow. Comparatively, poetry has a "temporal nature" because it "excels at the representation of actions."[21] Painting, on the other hand, being strictly spatial, "freezes processes into a single shot."[22] The Holodeck example also highlights the importance of having a "natural language" for the experience of telepresence to be

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20. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality,* 21.

21.Ibid., 24.

22. Ibid.

possible.[23] Ryan explains that as the ability to “manipulate the objects of the virtual world and interact with its inhabitants just as you would in the real world.”[24] That makes it possible for the VR user to become a "character in the virtual world.”[25] That continuity of consciousness that VR can supply is hard to be ordered in such a way as to manipulate time without threatening one's experience of telepresence, which is the main reason stories are hard to tell in it. But that notion of telepresence is built on certain assumptions that are not necessarily true. Those assumptions are also what makes narrative hard to conceive in VR for media theorists. For instance, in telepresence, is the actual world negated or is it allowed expression within the virtual or the virtual within the actual? Is the simulation a single constant flow of being in the virtual space or can it be interrupted so that we go in an out of telepresence at will? Telepresence is just assumed to be like the Holodeck. But that is a limited way of thinking how that technology can be incorporated into one's daily life. It celebrates in the virtual its potential to make us escape from the actual rather than highlight and enrich it. Maintaining immersion in the virtual world is a priority of most stories. *Maqtal*, however, despite being a narrative, is not committed to immersion in the story, but immersion with the story. Because of its aniconism, the story is configured in such a way as to use the semiotic context of *Maqtal*. Since *Maqtal* does not operate in a mimetic way but a suggestive one, its dynamics of immersion and distance differ. The way it produces aesthetic distance is dependent on the medium.

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23. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality, 38*.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

Poetry is a temporal medium, "it divides what should be perceived simultaneously into discrete elements and present them one at a time to the "eye" of the imagination."[26] Poetry is different than VR in that the type of immersion it produces is cognitive rather than experiential. An oral representation tells the story of *Maqtal*, whereas visual media show the story. In that sense, oral representations of *Maqtal* are diegetic, which refers to a representation that "presupposes language, either oral or written."[27] It seems that there is no way around the diegetic need to retell stories shown in order media in order to make sense of those stories. One assimilates the story of a movie by speaking about (and thus retelling) that movie and assessing the semantics of actions of the characters within it. In the context of *Maqtal* for instance, "Ashura discourses are also constructed through informal conversations—the daily talk among pious women and men."[28] It is safe to say that the oral tradition of *Maqtal* does not stop with the *Majales*, nor with lamentation poetry. At the heart of the oral tradition is the fact that, as it is the case with all religious stories, *Maqtal* is part of an informal hermeneutic practice where those stories are interpreted and discussed in private spaces. That practice is vital for the assimilation of graphic *Maqtal* representations, which in their incompleteness and their attempts at imaginative distancing always send the recipient back to that semiotic network of representations, semantics and symbols. As such, the network of representations relies on such informal conversations. Similarly, *Maqtal* in VR will rely on such a practice. But oral representations do not have the same

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26. Ryan, *Narrative Across Media*, 24.

27. Ibid., 13.

28. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 156.

problems with regard to *Maqtal* as visual ones. The act of reception of *Maqtal* is still performative in the case of the oral tradition. People are expected to cry and beat their chest. As such, in the oral tradition, it is more a question of getting people more immersed rather than less. On the other hand, painting is where one should first start to ask questions regarding *Maqtal* in VR.

VR and painting are similar in that they both struggle to manipulate time: VR by virtue of the telepresence of the VR user in it, and painting by virtue of its spatial and static nature. For instance, it will prove to be a tricky task to manipulate time in VR the way cinema does, without compromising the experience of telepresence in the medium. Although there might still be some techniques to accelerate time in a VR representation, telepresence is such that it necessitates the agency of the user in experiencing the virtual world. Painting has the particular feature of being a visual medium that is static. In her classification of media according the their ability to manipulate time and space, Mary-Laure Ryan designates painting as "spatial/static."[29] Painting is static because it "freezes processes into a single shot."[30] It is spatial because it displays its elements simultaneously and it has, a common feature with one's experience of space, a visual nature. What is sought after in creating narrativity is an ordering of events and there are different techniques of doing that. As discussed on the previous chapter, *Maqtal* paintings employ two methods of configuring narrative: pregnant moments and breaking the unity of space on the canvas. Both, when one is willing to question the assumptions behind telepresence, can be tools for creating narrative in VR. Whether

29. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality,* 21.

30. Ibid., 24.

they can function at the same time as method of aesthetic distancing is also a matter of questioning those assumptions.

With regard first of all to breaking the unity of space in a VR simulation, it all depends on the types of telepresence one is assuming. In other words, is the horizon of vision offered by the virtual world unified, like one's experience of the actual? Or can the phenomenological experience of the virtual be divided into various ones? To give a more concrete example: does the experience of telepresence have the ability to withstand a virtual world in which, if I look to the left I see heaven, and if I look to the right I see war? On the other hand, a pregnant moment is one that holds within it the ability to represent the entirety of the story. Such a pregnant moment can be autonomous, in that it does not presuppose prior knowledge of the story, or illustrative, in which case it would rely on the viewer's prior knowledge of the story. *Maqtal* representations are representational, they rely on the recipient's previous knowledge of the story. Experiencing a painting narratively thus necessitates an act of reception on the part of the beholder. Unless components of the painting are taken as at least contiguous if not chronological, and unless the signs of *Maqtal* can be interpreted, the narrativity of the painting will never be conveyed. VR is similar to painting in that it is more of a spatial medium than a temporal one, in that it allows more of an expression of space than one of time. From this standpoint, telepresence can seem to agree with the notion of a pregnant moment. A VR *Maqtal* representation that would consist in a pregnant moment in the story of *Maqtal* can provide the experience of telepresence and refer to the the narrative of *Maqtal* by way of signs and representamens. A pregnant moment of *Maqtal* in VR cannot but be a short simulation. Conventions should be conceived, and

established through practice, so that the VR user enters that pregnant moment in the virtual world with the disposition to experience *Maqtal* the way it should be experienced (according to the rules stated in the first chapter). The key here is to establish the right amount of imaginative distance from the events of *Maqtal*, so that the signs and symbols in the pregnant moment can be assimilated by the recipient hermeneutically. The question then, with regard to VR, is: does (or should) the experience of telepresence have a particular length? In other words, how long does a VR simulation need to be in order to be one of telepresence? This is where *Maqtal*'s generic painting of its characters can prove useful in providing that imaginative distancing. The question that should be raised here is: can telepresence accept an artistic generic display of people and things? "Presence requires a photorealistic display," writes Mary Laure Ryan, "with detailed effects of texture and shading, but it does not require a real-world content."[31] That is only true if we reduce telepresence to the off-switch telepresence or Holodeck telepresence. However, if we take telepresence to be possible outside of the boundaries of Holodeck telepresence, it might not require a photo-realistic display. Against the background of the actual, telepresence might be possible with generic displays.

In light of this, can telepresence incorporate the generic acting technique of *Taʿziyah* to create imaginative distancing? Or at least, can something be conceived, which would perform the same function as that generic acting? There is no clear cut answers to these questions yet, and it all depends on the way these techniques are introduced into a representation of *Maqtal* in VR. Of course, the proximity to the characters that VR allows will always be problematic to *Maqtal* representations. One

31. Ibid., 51.

way to incorporate such a method of acting would be to write a story within a story. One example of that would be to represent *Maqtal* indirectly, like in the case of film, by writing a story about a *Taʿziyah* group of actors that use *shabih* acting style when they perform *Taʿziyah*. At surface level, *Taʿziyah* seems to require acting that is imitative rather than suggestive. But that is only a function of aniconism. What is always constant however is that a balance must be maintained between immersion and aniconism in an action/reaction sort of way. The harder immersion strikes, the harder aniconism has to respond.

For instance, against its capacity to immerse the crowd, *Taʿziyah* has to pay a price: the medium has to be highlighted, the act of mediation exaggerated. That is the reason for the acting style. Film is the medium closest to VR in providing a photorealistic display. The reason it is film rather than theater is because both film and VR share the capacity to produce visual effects that are surreal. In VR, fiction can become reality. In *Taʿziyah*, fiction is performed. Because of its photorealistic display, "cinema usually relies on showing overspecifically (a shot customarily shows an excessive number of details, too many to notice)."[32] As such, "certain filmic techniques can be applied to emphasize particular aspects,"[33] such as selective framing, close up shots, lighting, and soundtrack. Selective framing is a,

> Means by which cinema can attribute certain qualities to characters or objects is called selective framing. This is no hard criterion, though, because all shots are essentially manipulative. Every shot unavoidably limits the image and creates an

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32. Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 52.

33. Ibid.

> off-screen space. However, some shots direct the viewer's attention more strongly than others.[34]

Those features are missing from it, or so it is assumed. Telepresence, because it is a first person experience, is assumed not to contain any framing capacity. In the strict sense of Holodeck telepresence, telepresence cannot be a framed experience. If freed from the notion of Holodeck telepresence, can telepresence contain any framing capacity?

The most extreme form of telepresence is the Holodeck example. The underlying assumption of narratological studies of VR is that telepresence works very much the way the Holodeck works. In VR theory, the virtual world is a strictly separate world from the actual. That is an assumption, when placed under the scrutiny of aesthetic distancing in *Maqtal* raises questions as to why such distancing techniques would ruin telepresence. The reality is that they only would do so, if one assumes telepresence to be Holodeck telepresence. When one forgoes that assumption, then certain forms of conceiving telepresence can agree with aesthetic distancing techniques involved in representing *Maqtal*. In addition, the VR representation would be narrative precisely because the recipient of *Maqtal* has an aniconic disposition to receive *Maqtal*, the narrative configuration of which, as argued, is shaped around aesthetic distancing. Once we drop the assumption behind telepresence, all sorts of horizons and questions open up as to what constitutes, and what could constitute, telepresence.

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34. Ibid.

Conclusion

Telepresence is the experience of someone in the virtual world as if they were in the actual. It is the main concept behind the experience of virtual reality. In VR theory, VR is defined and equated with the concept of telepresence. As such, because of the first person experience that envelops the VR user in a virtual world, narrative and VR are deemed as irreconcilable. Since there is no aesthetic distance between the VR user (or recipient) and the virtual (representation), i.e. since VR is completely spatially immersive, narrative is thought to be impossible in VR. Therefore, in relation to a medium, the way to study narrative is to see whether it conforms with the capacity of the medium to produce immersion or aesthetic distance. In relation to the recipient, a narrative must be studied in light of the act of reception on one end and emplotment on the other.

In *Maqtal*, which cannot be divorced from the practices in which it occurs, the act of reception is anchored in the bodily practices related to it. They are highly immersive. The operating philosophical concept behind those bodily practices is *Tashabbuh* (imitation), the will to imitate the Imams, who stand at the center of Shiʿi cosmology. One effect of the commemorations of Ashura is that it allows Shiʿis to internalize the ethics of the story of *Maqtal*, through the bodily practices of Ashura. Self-flagellation is a mnemonic device, it works to preserve the memory of the massacre. Self-flagellation and the milder chest-beating also link Shiʿis to the larger worldview of the House of Sorrows, in which suffering, especially that of the holy family, is central to the Shiʿi and it is embodied in the practice. The body is also a device of communication. For example, in chest-beating practices where lamentation poetry is sung (the so-called *nadbiyyat*),

the chest-beating becomes the rhythm. As such the body becomes a part of the representation, which is precisely how *Maqtal* practices bring the virtual world of *Maqtal* into the space of actuality, i.e. into the unmediated world outside of VR. Engaging the body in a performative way in the midst of a setting that provides complete chaos of signs causes the recipient to be completely immersed in the world *Maqtal*. The aim is for the world of *Maqtal* to be brought to the space of the actual, during the performance. There is an asymmetry then between the relation of virtual and actual in *Maqtal*, and that of virtual and actual in VR as telepresence.

Telepresence, it is assumed, is full immersion in a virtual world that is completely separate spatially from the actual world. That is the Holodeck notion of telepresence, which is the assumption in VR theory. That assumption must be tackled in order for it to be possible to represent *Maqtal* in it. The virtual is not necessarily a separate space from the actual. They can actually be expressed in the same space without compromising one another. The result of their interaction would just be a new virtual (or a new actual). If that assumption is undermined, it is not unimaginable that one would be able to represent *Maqtal* in VR. In other words, without that assumption, it would be possible to think of techniques of aesthetic distancing in VR. Also, without it, it would be possible to ask all sorts of questions regarding the representation of *Maqtal*, or other stories for that matter, allowing the possibility of speculating on aesthetic distancing in VR.

In order to speculate on potential techniques of aesthetic distancing in VR, I have attempted several comparisons between VR and different media and the type of aesthetic distance that *Maqtal* representations employ in each of them. The representation of *Maqtal*, I have argued, revolves around a certain types of aniconism

specific to *Maqtal*, but which in essence can be related back to the wider context of Islamic aniconism. The general notion of aniconism is built around the idea that divine Truth cannot be represented faithfully, in that a medium always falls short of representing it. Aniconism is not merely the idea that figural representations are disallowed in Islam, that would be a gross simplification. Aniconism in *Maqtal* is an expression of the belief that the story of Husayn cannot be encapsulated. As a result, a harmony must be established where the recipient must stay active in their reception of *Maqtal* and a representation must distance the recipient from the actual event. The imaginative, hermeneutic and performative aspects of the immersion must be preserved. This is what makes emplotment in *Maqtal* suggestive rather than imitative. In most other cases, a narrative is configured around the notion that it must imitate the events it is representing, which is why there is the desire to make the medium invisible. The less visible the medium, the more likely the recipient to think that they are witnessing the real event.

Creating plot, or emplotment, is a question of creating one concordant story out of a discordant set of events. It is in that sense a discordant concordance. *Maqtal*, inversely, is a concordant discordance. Maqtal's narrativity is configured around aesthetic distancing techniques that highlight the presence of the medium. In *Maqtal*, the narrative is such that it aims to merely suggest the event it represents. This dynamic not only allows but favors that the medium become apparent during the representation, rather than remain hidden. As a result, the less the act of mediation appears (the more pervasive the medium) the more immersive it is and thus the more aesthetic distancing techniques must be applied. Different aesthetic distancing techniques and different

ways of constructing narrativity are used depending on the medium in which *Maqtal* is represented. How would those aesthetic distancing and narrative configuring technique be applied in such a way as to agree with telepresence? That is a question that I have attempted to answer by comparing VR to other media and applying their examples of aesthetic distancing on VR. However, as mentioned earlier, I will attempt to forgo the assumption that telepresence is merely Holodeck telepresence. When that assumption is dropped, many questions can be asked as what an experience of telepresence that agrees with *Maqtal* would be.

In painting, *Maqtal* establishes narrativity in two ways: pregnant moments and breaking the unity of space on the canvas. Both of these techniques use the generic nature of the image and characters to create representamens, or signs that can be used to refer to several characters of events. The generic nature of the image makes possible narrative configuration on one hand and figural representation on the other. VR is similar to painting in that its capability to manipulate time is not obvious. Time manipulation is vital for discordant concordance to occur, meaning for the narrative to be constructed. By comparison, film is a medium where manipulation of time, through cinematic editing, seems intuitive. On the other hand, the first person experience of telepresence does not seem to agree with cinematic editing. In thinking about the pregnant moment, there does not seem to be anything preventing it from becoming both a distancing and a narrative configuring technique in VR. However, the questions one needs to ask are: how long must an experience of telepresence be? Can it be one of few seconds? On the other hand, breaking the unity of space on the canvas can translate into VR as well, which raises the question: is the field of vision (one's horizon) unified or can

it be broken down into several ones? *Taʿziyah* is the place where it is most apparent that aesthetic distancing techniques are foundational in the narrative configuration of *Maqtal*. *Taʿziyah* is similar to VR in that it offers two things: a shared space between the audience and the representation; the time of the representations conforms to the time of the action, which means that, for its entire duration, the play is never interrupted. In response to those two traits, *Taʿziyah* incorporates several notions of time. It can also be said that it breaks down the unity of time. This leads me to ask two questions, pertaining to *Maqtal* in VR: is the representation such that one is constantly in the virtual or can be it be interrupted at will? Is there a notion of telepresence where time can be accelerated or decelerated? Acting in *Taʿziyah* is similar in its effects to the generic painting of characters. The acting is itself generic. In view of this, can telepresence agree with generic acting style of *Taʿziyah*? Otherwise, can a new technique be conceived so as to perform the same function as generic acting? Finally, film, which shares the photorealistic display with VR, establishes aesthetic distance by going around the story altogether. But film has a framing capacity to make that possible. As such, if freed from Holodeck telepresence, can telepresence have a framing capacity that would agree with *Maqtal*? I believe that a combination of these techniques might be amenable to VR rather than a single one. These questions might be the basis for a new form of telepresence, one which incorporates the actual instead of separating it from the virtual.

On the other hand, this is relevant to whomever is interested in the *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, aspect of representing *Maqtal*. Criteria for how *Maqtal* can be represented in VR must bet set in order for questions of jurisprudence to be asked. Also, this research is, not only pertinent to VR theory, but to anyone interested in

representing a narrative in VR. *Maqtal* is part of a practice that invites the virtual to the space of the actual. In the end, this research is particularly relevant to anyone committed to steering VR from the life destroying capacities it might possess. VR should be a tool to enrich the actual, which should not be sacrificed for the sake of the virtual.

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